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CORBIE'S POOL

By

SUSAN MORLEY

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CORBIE'S POOL.

BY

SUSAN MORLEY,

AUTHOR OF

'AILEEN FERRERS,' 'MARGARET CHETWYND,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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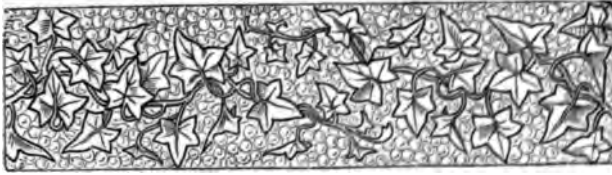
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CORBIE'S POOL.



CHAPTER I.

IT was, however, impossible that things should long continue to go on so smoothly, and there came, at last, an evening early in September when Alice wandered restlessly alone in the garden by moonlight, disgusted with her brother, vexed with herself, and more thoroughly anxious and unhappy than she had ever been before. She could think of the day just ended only with the deepest

mortification, while to look forward into the future was but to see worse complications of sorrow and shame closing round her.

There had been a cricket-match that day at Atherley Hall, a place about eight miles from Earnscliffe and two from Thornycroft. The Atherley cricket-club had been started several years previously by Mr. Irwine's numerous sons, and had been kept up with considerable spirit, even after the brothers were scattered about the world.

Mr. Brandon, among his attempts to win popularity for his son, had set on foot a similar club at Earnscliffe under Dick's nominal patronage, and for the last year or two these clubs had played regularly against each other twice in each season.

Dick was no great cricketer himself, but he drove the Earnscliffe eleven, which was made up among the tenantry and servants, over to Atherley on his drag early in the

day fixed for the last match of the year, and undertook to remain there to see it out and then take them home again.

In the afternoon there was a small gathering of neighbours at Atherley, composed chiefly of a few ladies and clergymen, who felt it incumbent on them to show a proper local interest in the respective elevens.

Alice Brandon drove over with Jessie Leigh, but her previous experience of these parties made her time her arrival as late as she could with tolerable politeness, and it was nearly five when she and Jessie made their appearance in the cricket-field.

A small crowd of village partisans watched the game eagerly from one end of the field, while under the trees at the other end the ladies from the hall and rectory sat with their little group of guests, and looked on more or less indifferently.

Alice took it all in at a glance and foresaw a dreary hour.

Jessie soon joined her brothers, who with their uncle were staying at Thornycroft, and wandered off with them to watch the game from a nearer point of view; but Alice felt obliged to stay with the circle seated under the trees, and found it quite as dull as she had expected, for the few gentlemen present were mixing among the people, George Randolph and Colonel Myddleton were acting as umpires, and Lady Elizabeth was not of the party at all.

Mrs. Irwine and her sister, Mrs. Johnstone, the rector's wife, were commonplace, conventional women, whose only idea of conversation was a flow of harmless gossip, and the talk among the dozen ladies round the tea-table dribbled gently on until Alice at last reached a point of irritation when she could with difficulty refrain from break-

ing in on the peaceful twaddle of her companions with a few startling contradictions of their complacent platitudes.

The welcome sound of the church clock striking six saved her for the moment. She rose instantly, saying that she had ordered her carriage to come to the gate of the field at that hour, and that her ponies would not stand within hearing of the band which enlivened the proceedings.

She took leave, summoned Jessie, and crossed the field to the gate where her carriage was waiting, the two spirited ponies giving full occupation to the smart little groom who stood at their heads.

The Earnscliffe coachman, who was hovering near, came up as the two girls approached, and asked to speak to Alice.

Martin had been with Mr. Brandon for the last twenty years, he had taught Alice to ride and drive, and she turned at once to

attend to him, sure that he would not stop her without good cause. He was himself off duty for a few days, having hurt his arm, which he carried in a sling, and he had come over on the drag merely as a spectator in the Earnscliffe interest.


‘What is it, Martin?’ Alice asked, moving a little aside with him as she spoke.

‘Mr. Richard, ma’am—it won’t do for him to try to drive the drag home——’

Alice understood at once.

‘How bad is he?’ she asked quickly.

‘Well, he’s worse nor I’ve ever seen him, Miss Alice, and he’d best not go among the company again and disgrace the family. I can manage to keep him out of sight till it’s time to start, and we might get off quietly without his being much noticed, if only there was anybody to drive. He’ll sit on the box safe enough, I think, without fall-



ing off, but he isn't fit to touch the reins or the whip with four such horses as ours.'

'Can't either Thomas or Robert drive home?' said Alice.

'Not they!' answered the old man contemptuously. 'They can dress themselves to look as if their clothes grew on them, and sit with their arms folded staring straight before them, and jump off and on the drag as if they both went by the same clockwork, but I daren't let either of them drive, and I can't do it myself with this arm useless. Young Robson could do it well enough, but Mr. Richard doesn't like him overmuch—and it wouldn't do to have a row about it here at starting.'

'Intolerable!' exclaimed Alice. 'I will drive the drag home myself, Martin. He never dislikes my doing it. Keep him quiet and out of the way till we go. Let all the

men know that you will start directly the match is over, and when you are nearly ready send Robert for me.'

Martin had all along been aiming at this, and was content, though his manner showed that he disliked extremely that his young mistress should be forced into doing what even he felt to be unfitting for her on such an occasion. He walked off with a dry 'Very good, Miss Alice: I'll see to it;' and Alice turned quickly to a young clergyman who had walked up from the cricket-ground with them and was talking to Jessie while politely waiting to see them off.

'Would you mind driving Miss Leigh home, Mr. Sherwood?' she said. 'Martin tells me that Dick wants me to go with him on the drag, Jessie, and I am sure you will forgive my deserting you if Mr. Sherwood is kind enough to see you home.'

Jessie cheerfully acquiesced.

Mr. Sherwood had taken Mr. Carr's duty during his absence, and had come over in the morning on the Earnscliffe drag.

'I shall be delighted to drive Miss Leigh home,' he said, 'but—' and looking at Alice he hesitated, for he knew enough of what had been going on behind the scenes to guess what Martin's communication must really have been, and he wondered at her consenting under the circumstances to gratify her brother's whim.

'It is all settled,' Alice answered decidedly, as if in reply to some unspoken question. 'If you will kindly take Miss Leigh and my ponies safe home for me, I shall be extremely obliged to you.'

Mr. Sherwood saw that she wished for this help and for no other, so he made no further opposition, and two minutes

later the pony-carriage had driven off, and Alice slowly recrossed the field to join again the party which she had just so gladly quitted. She would much rather have lingered about alone in the gardens until the time for starting, but it seemed to her that if she meant to conceal her brother's condition at all effectually she must carry off her change of plan as if it were a mere freak of her own.

‘Was not your carriage ready, Miss Brandon?’ said Mrs. Irwine. ‘If you really must go, let me send to order it.’

‘Thank you,’ answered Alice, ‘but it was ready and is gone. Mr. Sherwood is driving Miss Leigh home, and I am going on my brother's drag.’

She knew that almost every lady present would choose to be scandalised at her going on the drag, the only lady among a party of men, and those men not gentlemen. She

was prepared for some one even expressing such an opinion ; but the form which criticism really took was totally unexpected.

‘But, my dear, was that wise?’ said Mrs. Irwine. ‘Miss Leigh is so young—and Mr. Sherwood is quite a stranger among us!’

Alice understood, but she would not seem to understand. In the emergency she had not given a thought to the petty proprieties held so important at Atherley, and to be thus reminded of them was irritating. She was just in the mood to be scornfully defiant under the insinuated reflection on her taste and discretion.

‘I have seen enough of Mr. Sherwood to know that I may trust my ponies in his hands with perfect confidence, I assure you,’ she answered coolly.

‘I was not thinking of the *ponies*,’ replied Mrs. Irwine, unable to refrain from giving

the injudiciously timed counsel. 'Young people are naturally apt to forget such things, but it is impossible to be too scrupulously careful of a girl's dignity.'

'Quite impossible!' said Alice impatiently. 'But we should differ as to the right way of caring for it. Moral coddling is even worse than physical.'

The words were regretted as soon as spoken, for Alice felt that the retort was disrespectful to an elderly lady, and also that it was absurd as well as ill-bred in its pretentious self-assertion. The consciousness was not soothing to already ruffled nerves.

'Modern fashion gives all sorts of contemptuous nicknames to what used to be considered ordinary decorum,' said Mrs. Irwine rather sharply. 'But in this case I think most people would agree with me. What does Mrs. Randolph say?'

‘That she has no doubt Jessie will have a pleasant drive,’ replied Mrs. Randolph lightly, anxious, like a sweet-tempered, well-bred woman, to end so disagreeable a discussion as soon as possible.

But Alice found a sting even in these well-meant words. She felt the disapprobation of her words and manner which Mrs. Randolph refrained from expressing, and most unreasonably she resented it all the more impatiently because in her heart she knew it to be just. Vexed with herself and ashamed of her want of self-control, yet unable at once to conquer her irritation, she took refuge in flight.

‘I shall go and find out how much longer the match is likely to last,’ she said, and walking off towards the rougher crowd, she left the ladies to discuss her temper, manners, and principles as freely as they pleased.

She was not seen again till half an hour later, when, the match being over, the Irwines and Randolphins were walking up the village lane from the cricket-field to the hall, and were pausing for a few last words at the gate where the field-path to Thornycroft diverged.

The Earnscliffe drag at this moment came down the lane from the Atherley stables ; but Alice was driving fast and did not slacken her speed as she passed the party, though the clouds of dust raised by the drag could not be agreeable to anyone.

‘Pretty cool, that!’ said a young Irwine, who was at home at present. ‘Bad form, too, as I suppose she would say herself of anyone else who did it.’

‘I wonder that even Mr. Brandon does not know better than to let her go about in that wild way!’ said Mrs. Irwine, very much shocked. ‘It is so unfeminine.’

Colonel Myddleton said nothing until he and the Randolphs were crossing the fields together. Then he exclaimed abruptly :

‘She talks less slang than almost any girl I know.’

‘That is true,’ said Mrs. Randolph. ‘But she is in one of her odd moods to-day. She sent that young curate home with Jessie, and stayed herself to go on the drag ; and when Mrs. Irwine prosed a little about the proprieties she answered quite rudely. How frantic Bertha would be if she knew of such proceedings!’

Colonel Myddleton answered impatiently :

‘If Bertha wished Jessie never to be out of a chaperon’s sight, she should not have left her at Earnscliffe, as I know Miss Brandon plainly told her.’

‘But even for herself this sort of freak is hardly the thing,’ said Mrs. Randolph gently.

‘Of course it is not; but I have no doubt that scamp of a brother of hers is at the bottom of it all. I could not look after him to-day, and I suspect he got drunk, for I saw that their old coachman had taken him in charge and was keeping him out of sight as much as possible. He was probably too tipsy to drive home himself, and not tipsy enough to let anyone else among the men do it, so that his sister had to be called in to the rescue.’

‘Then, indeed, she may be excused for being provoked by Mrs. Irwine’s lecture,’ said Mrs. Randolph, with ready compassion. ‘But surely, Roger, it can’t be safe for her to drive those four horses all the way to Earnscliffe?’

‘There are men enough to help her if anything goes wrong, or she gets exhausted,’ replied Colonel Myddleton; ‘but

she'll get through all right. The horses are perfectly trained, and she knows how to drive them, and has pluck enough for anything.'

'But what an unpleasant position for her!' said Mrs. Randolph. 'At least it would be to most girls.'

'But not to her, you think,' was the quick reply. 'Well! perhaps you are right there. The necessity for defying local public opinion would not make a disagreeable duty more trying to her, I admit. But the reality is bad enough in this case without any fanciful additions. If Dick should prove either noisy or quarrelsome, or if any of the other young men are verging on the same condition, there may easily be a row which it would be most unseemly for her to be mixed up in without better protection than the coachman's, good old fellow though he is.'

‘Poor girl!’ said Mrs. Randolph. ‘But I suppose nothing could have been done to help her?’

‘Only what I can still do. I am going to leave you here, meet the drag at the turnpike, and see her safe home.’

‘Can you be in time?’

‘Easily. I shall be there in less than five minutes from here, and they cannot make the round by the high road before that. I trust to you to explain my absence to Lady Elizabeth, and to George to send my dog-cart over to Earnscliffe to fetch me back.’

The next moment he had crossed the fence which separated their path from a wood, and quickly disappeared.

‘Well, what do you say to that?’ said Mrs. Randolph to her husband, as they walked leisurely on in the opposite direction.

‘It is a very good thought,’ replied George Randolph; ‘for to have stopped the drag in the village and joined her there would have set all the tongues in the neighbourhood going.’

‘Roger has the knack of always doing the right thing in the best way,’ said Mrs. Randolph; ‘and no one is so sure to do a kindness to anyone who needs it. But in this case—don’t you think——’

‘That we are in for another Brandon connection?’ answered her husband. ‘It looks like it.’

‘And, from something she said yesterday, I think your mother has given her consent.’

‘Yes, I should say that she had—only tacitly, though. Roger was never given to confidences, even in the old days before he went to India.’

‘Not to us; but I always fancied that

Harold knew whatever it was that went wrong with him then. Well, I want him to marry, but I can't quite reconcile myself to its being Alice Brandon.'

'Your imagination travels fast. It may be all on his side, or there may be nothing in it. He is quite capable of taking a great deal of trouble for a girl without being in love with her.'

Mrs. Randolph, however, altogether declined to believe either that a spirit of general benevolence might be supposed to account for Colonel Myddleton's concern about Alice, or that she was likely to be indifferent if he were not.

Colonel Myddleton himself, meanwhile, had reached the turnpike two or three minutes before the drag came in sight.

'I am going your way, Miss Brandon,' he said, as it stopped. 'Can you give me a lift?'


Alice's acquiescence was the coldest and most concise possible, for she dared not trust herself to speak. She could not doubt, however, that he had come solely in order to be of use to her should she need help, and there was comfort and support in the mere fact of his presence for that purpose.

Fortunately, the men and boys who crowded the drag were all sober enough, even after their holiday and victory, to show a creditable consideration for Alice by being silent and quiet; while, disgraceful as Dick's condition was, his mood was for the moment, luckily, more good-humoured than aggressive. He was disposed to patronise his companions, and to chaff passers-by rather than to quarrel with them or insult them; but his wit was foolish and vulgar, and the snatches of songs which he persisted in singing were not, in Colonel

Myddleton's opinion, at all fit for Alice's ears, especially at such a time and in such company. He had too much good sense to remonstrate and perhaps provoke a quarrel, but it would have given him real satisfaction to have dropped Dick into the nearest ditch, leaving him to come to his senses at his leisure, and find his own way home.

Alice drove on at a steady rapid pace, never taking her eyes from her horses, or showing her shame and disgust except by her changing colour, until at last she pulled up at the lodge-gates of Earnscliffe, where all the men, except Martin and the two grooms, left the drag and dispersed to their respective homes.

Alice returned their parting salutations with a grave, comprehensive 'Good-night,' and was about to drive on, when, changing her mind, she followed as usual the impulse



of the moment, and waited to say, firmly and audibly :

‘And thank you all for having done your best to help me.’

The frank recognition of the sympathy and kindness shown to her was deserved and was evidently appreciated, though, with more tact and delicacy than might have been expected from them, the men all went their way in silence.

Colonel Myddleton no longer wondered, as he had sometimes done, why Alice was so popular with all her father’s people both at Earnscliffe and Scotsborough ; but though her outspoken gratitude touched him extremely and quickened his own sympathy and compassion, it took him completely by surprise, and even jarred a little upon his fastidious taste and conventional instincts.

If at almost any time within the last ten

years Roger Myddleton had been called upon to describe his ideal woman, or what he believed to be such, she would certainly have been much too dignified and reticent ever to speak as Alice had just spoken, straight from her heart, regardless of everything but the grateful impulse to do full justice to fellow-creatures who had been kind to her. But, as so often happens, the type of woman of whom his judgment approved had no power to stir in him any feeling stronger than admiration and friendship.

A painful experience early in life had tended to strengthen his theoretical dislike to every attempt on the part of women to shake off the fetters of conventional rules, and to increase his aversion to every form of impulsiveness and want of self-control. But though no one could possibly be less like his ideal than Alice Brandon, she was

certainly beginning to absorb his attention and occupy his thoughts almost to the exclusion of every other interest. As yet, however, he would have said, without any idea of self-deception, that his feeling for her was only friendly compassion for a girl so gifted and so unfortunately circumstanced.

As they drove on through the park Colonel Myddleton leaned forward from his seat immediately behind Alice and said:

‘I suppose we shall find Mr. Brandon at home as it is Saturday evening?’

‘Most likely,’ she replied, without turning her head.

‘Then I shall ask you to take me on to the house that I may speak to him.’

‘About this?’ she said in a low voice, with a quick glance at her brother, who had subsided into a state of stupid sleepiness.

‘Yes. Something must be done. You must not be exposed to this sort of thing again, and as Vaughan is away, I hope you will let me take his place, as far as I can, instead of leaving you to fight the battle single-handed.’

Alice did not answer, for at that moment, in a side-path, but only a few yards from the drive, she saw her mother’s donkey-chair and her father walking beside it. Mr. Brandon made an imperative sign to her to stop till they came up, and even called to her to do so ; but resolutely ignoring it, she dashed rapidly on, and passing the turn to the house, took her team very creditably round a corner and through the gates into the stable-yard. Mr. Brandon meanwhile had sent his wife home, and crossing the grass, entered the yard by a side-wicket almost before Alice had descended from her seat.

Always quickly irritated by any failure in prompt obedience to his orders, he demanded sharply, 'What she meant by not stopping when he told her?'

'To keep the knowledge of *that* from my mother as long as may be,' she concisely replied, directing his attention to Dick, who was being helped down by the grooms.

In the first outburst of his rage Mr. Brandon forgot everything else, and the scene that followed between him and his son made the next few moments among the most painful memories of Alice's life. Her father's uncontrolled violence and her brother's drunken folly were horrible to witness, and each word and gesture on either side seemed to stamp itself on her brain with torturing force, every sense being rendered doubly acute by the consciousness of Colonel Myddleton's presence.

'You had better go,' he said to her in

a low voice. 'You can do no good here.'

'Not yet,' she replied. 'But papa will soon be able to hear reason, and I cannot let him learn it all from the servants.'

'But leave it to me. Send somebody to take your brother away, and let me talk to your father. I don't think he has yet even noticed that I am here.'

Alice hesitated about complying. She felt as if she ought to stay to give her father such comfort and help as it might be in her power to give when his passion should have spent itself.

Seeing that she paused in doubt, Colonel Myddleton went up to Mr. Brandon, and compelled his attention by at once speaking straight to the point.

'I have been obliged to take upon myself to see Miss Brandon safe home from Atherley,' he said; 'and now, if you will

tell her to leave us, I will explain exactly what has happened. Perhaps I may even be able to be of some use with regard to the future, for I have unavoidably had some experience of similar cases.'

Mr. Brandon's fury was, as usual, short-lived though violent. He was now himself again; and after rather roughly desiring Alice to go home to her mother, and to take care that nothing of all this reached her ears, he told Martin 'to see Mr. Richard to the house,' and then turned to Colonel Myddleton courteously enough.

Alice, as she left the yard, heard him say quite calmly:

'You have been very kind, Colonel Myddleton, and I thank you for it.'


The gentlemen went one way and Alice another, and she saw no more of them until they all met at dinner nearly an hour later. Her father was then silent and pre-

occupied, and she saw with a feeling of profound pity that the conviction of his son's utter worthlessness had now been forced upon him, and that he knew at last that all his hopes for the future, as far as they depended upon Dick, must be given up.

The disappointment was evidently as hard to bear as she had always known that it would be; but she could not yet hear anything either from him or from Colonel Myddleton as to what had passed between them, for not only were her mother and Jessie Leigh present, but Mr. Sherwood was also one of the party.

Richard's absence was accounted for by a headache brought on by the heat of the day.

It was a dull and silent dinner. Everyone seemed oppressed by a sense of something wrong, and when the ladies left the



dining-room Mrs. Brandon said anxiously to Alice :

‘I am sure something has vexed your father.’

Alice tried to make light of it, but Mrs. Brandon had caught the infection of depression, and almost immediately left the two girls together and went to her room.

She had scarcely gone when Mr. Sherwood joined them, saying to Alice that her father and Colonel Myddleton seemed to have some business to transact, and were gone to the library.

Wretched and anxious, Alice felt equally unfit for music or small-talk, and a happy inspiration suggesting a means of relief, she settled Jessie and Mr. Sherwood at chess in the corridor, which she knew would make them quite content, and wandered out herself into the garden.

She was thankful to be alone, free to think, and to let fatigue and heartsickness have their way unchecked, for a while, at any rate.

There was certainly cause enough for the restless misery which oppressed Alice as she wandered about. She grieved to think that it could scarcely be possible any longer to shield her mother from sharing in a trouble which to her would be so heart-breaking a sorrow, while she felt even more for her father, to whose proud, ambitious, self-reliant nature such a checkmate in the game he had been playing would be bitter indeed.

But the sharpest sting of all came from quite another source, for the last few hours had taught her to understand herself.

The knowledge of the strength of her own feeling for Colonel Myddleton might

not, under other circumstances, have come to Alice quite so soon ; but now her dread of losing the friendship which had made this summer so different from others, proved to her how precious it was, how completely she had learned to rely on his help and counsel in every difficulty, how unconsciously she had grown to trust absolutely to his judgment, and what perfect rest and happiness might have been hers as his wife.

‘ Might have been,’ she said firmly to herself, for though she believed that he liked and admired her, and was even beginning to love her, she told herself with blunt frankness that that beginning would never now grow to more. She admitted to herself that he was in no way pledged to her either by word or look ; that not even the most chivalrously scrupulous sense of honour could make

him hesitate to draw back ; and she felt sure that from this day he would do so.

He had been kindness itself, he had helped her in her need, and if necessary would help her again ; but as she thought of the events of that afternoon, of her brother's conduct, her father's, even her own, as sure to have been reported to him by Mrs. Randolph and the Irwines, she could not suppose that he, proud and fastidious and sensitive to the world's opinion as she knew him to be, would dream for a moment of connecting himself by marriage with a family so certain to disgrace him, and belonging, too, to his own neighbourhood.

She must make up her mind to give up all that she valued most ; to struggle on alone through even more troubled waters than had hitherto surrounded her ; and as

her fancy pictured the dreary prospect before her, she involuntarily thought of Corbie's Pool and the Lady's Cross, and tried in vain to shake off the impression that she, like Cicely Radclyffe, was under the spell, and that for her, too, every promise of happiness must inevitably be nipped in the bud.

She heard the sound of wheels on the gravel on the other side of the house, and knew that it must be Colonel Myddleton's dog-cart coming round to take him away. There was a pause—she caught the murmur of voices—then again the sound of wheels, this time dying gradually away down the drive towards the lodge—and she felt as if all of her life that she cared for were over. The rest could only be a weary, endless strife with no hope of happiness even from success.

Her reverie was, however, suddenly in-

errupted, though she had heard no steps crossing the grass.

‘Thanks to your white dress I have found you at last, Miss Brandon,’ said Colonel Myddleton. ‘I have sent my trap to wait for me at the lodge. I wanted to see you before I went, for I thought you would be anxious to hear the result of my talk with your father.’

Alice did not find it easy to speak at that moment, but her silence passed as anxiety, and he went on :

‘Mr. Brandon was quite reasonable. I told him all that I knew of your brother’s habits, and he agrees with me that there is but one chance left. On the plea of health he will, as soon as possible, send Dick on a long yachting voyage under the care and control of the most experienced doctor that can be found. I know one well who has the highest reputation for the management

of such cases, and I believe he is now disengaged. Your father and I have both written to him. He is to answer by telegram; and if he can go, all details can be easily and quickly arranged by anyone who has Mr. Brandon's wealth and energy. This is the only chance of cure; and in this way the world and your mother will be left to suppose it a question of health.'

'The world will not be deceived,' said Alice.

'Probably not, but it will be silenced, at any rate, towards you all. And though Mrs. Brandon must be made anxious, she will be spared a worse sorrow. Your father made a great point of that. Besides it is much better, with regard to the future, that the story of the present should not be written in lines more ineffaceable than necessary.'

‘It is wiser, I suppose. But I own that I have no hope. Poor papa!’

‘He faces it bravely,’ said Colonel Myddleton, ‘but one knows what it must be to him. I spoke to *him* of the chances of cure, but I agree with you in fearing that they are very faint; and I am glad to think that to you personally, grieve though you must over such a collapse of your brother’s life, it is not such a sorrow as it must be to your father and mother. You will be all the better able to cheer them under it.’

This was, at the moment, too much for Alice, feeling as she did that *her* life was wrecked by Dick’s folly as well as his own.

‘True,’ she said bitterly, ‘for to me personally it means only a family life clouded by sorrow and shame—social disgrace—and isolation from all my best friends.’

‘You do not say that seriously, Miss

Brandon, I am sure. Much sorrow and many annoyances such a trouble must inevitably bring, I know, but you cannot believe that anything that your brother or anyone else may say or do can stand between you and your real friends. Do have faith enough in human nature to trust that your troubles will only increase the affection of all those who really love you.'

Half of Alice's misery vanished as he spoke, for it seemed to her that such words, so spoken, could have but one meaning. He had sought her when he might have gone without seeing her—and had sought her to give her this assurance! Superstitious fears had no longer any power to chill or depress her.



CHAPTER II.

ASILENCE followed, scarcely less expressive, or (to Alice at any rate) less agitating than words would have been; and before it was broken on either side Alice's attention was claimed by some one calling her name repeatedly in a gasping, breathless fashion.

Turning quickly, she saw a little girl running across the lawn towards her.

'Dot!' she exclaimed. 'Child! How *do* you come here at this time of night and in such a state?'

Alice might well be surprised and

alarmed, for Dot (otherwise Maude) Chaloner, who was a precocious sprite of seven years old, ought to have been in her bed at Clifton Grange for the last two hours or more, instead of turning up at Earnscliffe in this way, alone, hatless and breathless, with her frock torn and dirty, and with a white little face, even more completely 'all eyes' than usual.

'Oh! Please—will you come and let Bertie out of the big garret? Parker locked him up there this afternoon, and at first he didn't mind much, but after dark he got awfully frightened—and I know he'll be ill again if he stays there much longer.'

'Won't Parker let him out?' asked Alice.

'She's gone with all the others, except Eliza and Ben, to a party at Baron's Bridge, and she's got the key in her pocket,

I know. Oh! *Won't* you come?' cried the child, in an agony of impatience.

'Yes. Directly, my darling,' replied Alice. 'Poor little Bertie shall not stay there a moment longer than I can help.'

Taking Dot's hand she began to walk towards the lodge, meanwhile saying to Colonel Myddleton:

'I don't want to lose a minute, and I am sure I may ask you to go back to the house for me and explain where I am gone. I shall most likely find it necessary to stay all night; but somebody had better come over at once to bring back a message.'

'Let me first drive you and the child to Clifton,' answered Colonel Myddleton. 'You will get there very much sooner, and I can bring any message you like as I come back. It is not ten yet, so there is plenty of time before you will be missed.'

Alice at once gratefully accepted this

offer, and, much to the amazement of the groom waiting with the dog-cart, the whole party on reaching the lodge scrambled into their seats as quickly as possible, and Colonel Myddleton drove off very fast in exactly the opposite direction from Thornycroft, where he was supposed to be going.

‘ Now, Dot,’ Alice said, bending over the child, who was seated between herself and Colonel Myddleton, ‘ tell me what has happened. What had Bertie done to make Parker punish him in this way?’

‘ We took Jack and Ettie with us to fish in the duck-pond,’ replied Dot, ‘ and they made themselves a great mess, and she was awfully angry and locked Bertie up in the big far garret and me in the outer one, and gave us no tea. She said yesterday she would do it if we went to the pond again; but we thought it was all talk, and never minded her.’

‘That was naughty,’ remonstrated Alice gently.

‘Of course we’re naughty—Bertie and me,’ responded Dot coolly. ‘You can’t have any fun if you’re not. But she had no right to punish us this time. It wasn’t *our* business to keep Jack and Ettie out of mischief.’

‘You need not have taken them into it,’ said Alice. ‘But why was not Eliza with them?’

‘Because she was ironing Parker’s smart gown for the party,’ said Dot, whose intense indignation at the cruel treatment of her beloved Bertie had completely broken down the strange reticence which usually impels children to keep nursery secrets so inviolate. ‘*I* don’t mind being locked up—not much,’ she ran on; ‘but when it got dark and there were all sorts of queer noises, Bertie got wild with fright. He’s

quite a *little* boy, you know'—this in an apologetic parenthesis apparently intended for Colonel Myddleton's benefit. 'I shouted to him through the door that it was only mice and owls and things, but I couldn't get him to listen ; and he kept on screaming so often, and cried so dreadfully, that I couldn't bear to hear him, so I came for you.'

'But how did you get out?' asked Alice.

'There's a window in *my* garret that looks into the yard, and I knew Ben would be there, so I climbed up to it by some old boxes. I couldn't open it, but I took off one of my boots and broke the glass with it, and I called to Ben and told him all about it. He went to the nursery to get the keys, but Eliza said that Parker had taken them away with her ; so then he made her help him to get the big ladder,

and he came up and pushed open the window and got in to me. But we couldn't help Bertie, because that garret has only skylights, you know. I wanted Ben to go and fetch somebody to force the door open, but he said Dixon had made him swear not to leave the place till he came back; and of course Eliza had to stay with baby; so I said Ben must take me out down the ladder, and I would go for you, while he went back and sat by the door, and kept talking to Bertie till you came.'

'And you were not afraid to come all this way by yourself?' said Colonel Myddleton.

Dot hesitated, but truth triumphed.

'Yes—I was—rather,' she admitted reluctantly. 'But there was no other way to get Bertie let out, and the moon made it quite light for me; though I think Bertie was worse after it came, because it makes

such queer light and dark places up in those garrets, you know. I ran all the way as fast as I could; but it seemed *so* far, and took me *such* a time to come!' And her voice broke into something like a sob.

'You are a brave, kind little girl,' said Colonel Myddleton. 'And here we are at the gate, you see, so Bertie will soon be let out now.'

'Dot,' interposed Alice quickly, 'has there been nobody but Eliza with baby all this evening?'

'Oh, baby's all right; she has often had him like this lately,' replied Dot frankly. 'Parker's a beast, Alie, and I hate her, but she *can* manage baby. He goes to sleep now right off as soon as she puts him to bed; and I heard her tell Eliza that old nurse was a fool for letting him be such a worry that she could never leave him.'

Dot spoke, of course, in perfect innocence


of the information which her words conveyed to her companions, who exchanged a glance of anxious comprehension.

In another moment they stopped at the door. It was not fastened, and Colonel Myddleton followed Alice and Dot into the house. All was dark and silent, and only the moonlight coming in at the staircase window enabled them to find their way to the upper floor.

‘Are the children really left in this woman’s sole charge?’ said Colonel Myddleton to Alice, when Dot was well in advance of them.

‘Yes, unfortunately they are. Their old nurse married, and this one came just before Juliet left home. She was most highly recommended.’

‘By some equally careful mother, I suppose,’ said Colonel Myddleton. ‘Have they no governess?’



‘No. One who came early in the summer proved useless and was dismissed, and has not yet been replaced. I must think what is to be done, for they are evidently not safe in Parker’s hands. Dot is perfectly truthful.’

‘The first thing is to release this poor little boy,’ was the reply. ‘If we cannot find the keys, we must force the doors open somehow.’

‘It is not likely that she would take two large door-keys in her pocket,’ said Alice. ‘They are probably somewhere about.’

As she spoke, they followed Dot into the nursery, where a good-natured but stupid-looking girl of fifteen was sitting half-asleep over some needlework. Roused by Dot’s impetuous entrance, she stood up, and stared with not unnatural astonishment at Colonel Myddleton.

A few questions from Alice, however, sufficed to extract a full confirmation of the child's story, except that it appeared (as Alice had guessed) that Parker had locked up the garret-keys in her workbox, and had then taken *that* key with her, so that nobody might get them.

Alice was just turning to consult Colonel Myddleton as to what had better be done next, when they were all startled by a noise in the garret just over their heads. There was a shrill scream, then a rush of feet, and a fall.

Alice did not hesitate another moment. Snatching up the poker, she broke open the box, seized on the keys, and, telling Colonel Myddleton to bring a candle, rushed off towards the garret-stairs. Dot trotted after them unheeded.

The baby, in its cot in the nursery, slept soundly through all the commotion; but

sounds from an inner room made it evident that the noise had disturbed Jack and Ettie, and that Eliza would have her hands full in quieting them again.

In the first garret the faithful Ben was still waiting patiently. He was a mere boy, and not particularly bright; but he was obedient and trustworthy, and was greatly valued as a most useful slave to his fellow-servants. He was devoted to all the children, but especially to Dot, and was evidently much relieved to see her safe back again from her daring expedition.

While Colonel Myddleton and Alice were trying to make the rusty key turn in the lock of the inner door, Ben kept on stammering rather incoherent excuses for having allowed the child to go alone to Earnscliffe at night, adding:

‘But I’ve never stirred, Miss Dot, all this time. I’ve sat close to the door, as

you bid me, and I told Master Bertie all about the fine circus at Baron's Bridge last week; and, except for a bit of a fright from the owls now and then, he's been pretty quiet and comfortable. But just a minute back something scared him terrible, and he's not spoken to me since.'

The key yielded and turned, the door opened, and they all went in. The candle Colonel Myddleton carried was blown out by the sudden draught, and for a moment, before he struck a match and relighted it, they saw exactly what Bertie had seen. The full harvest moon had just risen high enough to shine through one of the skylights at an angle which allowed its light to fall sharply on a large frameless old picture leaning against the wall in one corner among other useless rubbish. It was a coarse, wretched daub, apparently intended to be 'after Snyders,' for it re-

presented a huge wolf being torn down by hounds.

Seen as the poor little boy had seen it, suddenly lighted up in the midst of darkness, it was no wonder that it had seemed to his already over-strained nerves as if the horrible open-mouthed beasts were about to spring upon him. It was too much even for plucky little Dot in her tired and excited condition, and for the moment forgetting her brother in her terror, she clung convulsively to Alice, hiding her face in her dress, and effectually hampering her movements.

Alice lifted her up and gave her into Ben's arms.

'It is only an old picture in the moonlight, darling ; very ugly and horrid, but nothing to be afraid of. Ben will carry you to the nursery, and I know you will be a good, brave child and let Eliza put you to

bed at once. I will come and see you as soon as I can, but I must go to poor little Bertie now.'

'Where is he? Is he hurt?' gasped Dot, summoning courage to look round.

'There is nothing to hurt him, dear. He has been frightened, but we will take care of him,' said Alice, hastily moving so that the child could see nothing, and signing to Ben to carry her away at once.

Then Alice turned to the corner where Colonel Myddleton was already kneeling by Bertie. It was certainly no sight for a child like Dot. In rushing wildly away from the terrible creatures which had so suddenly and mysteriously appeared to him, the boy had evidently caught his foot in some tattered matting which lay about, had tripped, and in falling had struck his head against the corner of a box. He was now unconscious, and as Alice looked at the

tiny figure lying helplessly on the garret-floor, among dust and cobwebs, and saw the pallid face and blood-stained curls, her heart sank within her in despair, when she remembered that the parents were both absent, that the nearest doctor was four miles off, that there was not a single servant with any sense or experience in the house, and that she herself was absolutely ignorant as to what to do or to leave undone.

‘He is not dead?’ she said, in an awe-struck whisper.

‘No. He has only fainted from fright and exhaustion, I think. The bleeding has nearly stopped already, you see, so I hope that the cut is not serious. The case is bad enough without that to complicate it. We must move him at once, for he ought not to be *here* when he comes to himself. I will carry him, if you will bring the light.’

He raised the child gently in his arms, and thus they left the garrets.

‘Where shall I take him?’ said Colonel Myddleton, pausing when they reached the foot of the stairs. ‘Not to the nursery if it can be avoided, for he will probably have to be nursed for days with the greatest care, if life and reason are to be saved.’

Alice led the way to a room at the farthest end of the passage.

‘This is Juliet’s room,’ she said. ‘It is the quietest in the house, and when she is at home Bertie always sleeps here.’

The room was in tolerably habitable order, for Mrs. Chaloner had been expected to return about this time, but had suddenly postponed her coming for a week. As Colonel Myddleton laid Bertie down on his bed the child opened his eyes for a moment, but closed them again instantly with a low moan.

‘We must send at once for Dr. Wickham,’ cried Alice. ‘There must be something in the stable that Ben can ride. Will you see about it? And *do* you know what I ought to try to do in the meantime?’

It was before the days of the ambulance class mania, and Alice knew as little as Dot would have known what ought to be done.

‘I am not much of a doctor,’ replied Colonel Myddleton, ‘and I don’t understand young children at all; but the less you do the better, I should say, beyond washing away all the dirt and blood and making the poor little fellow as comfortable as you can. I will go and send off for Dr. Wickham, and then come back and help you.’

Alice very soon discovered that nothing she wanted for her work was in the room, and leaving the candle so that if by any

chance Bertie came to himself while she was away he should see at once where he was, she made her way along the dark passage to the nurseries to get what she required. The younger children were asleep again, and Dot, heroically obeying orders, had allowed herself to be made ready for bed; but she was evidently in an overwrought state of feverish anxiety, and was impatiently rejecting the bread and milk which Eliza had brought to her in accordance with the regular routine at bedtime.

‘Try to take it, Dot,’ said Alice. ‘You said you had no tea, so I am sure you must want it after being out so late; and you must not fret about Bertie. He had fallen and hurt himself a little, and he is sure to be rather ill for a day or two after all this, you know; but he is safe in his own bed in mamma’s room, and I am going to stay with him.’

Dot's face brightened, and Alice went on:

‘I want Eliza to come and help me to put the room to rights as soon as you are in bed and asleep, so you must try not to stay awake a minute longer than you can help. She shall leave the door open, and if the little ones wake, or you want anything, you can call. We shall hear you directly.’

Dot looked up and said resolutely:

‘She needn't stay till I am asleep if you want her for Bertie—not if she leaves a light.’

Dot duly thanked and caressed, Alice hurried back to her patient with the various things she had come to seek. At the door of his room she met Colonel Myddleton carrying in one hand a shaded lamp and in the other a coal-box.

‘I have sent to Baron's Bridge to beg

Dr. Wickham to come as soon as possible,' he said. 'Also to desire the servants to return at once. And I have been foraging in the lower regions, as I see you have up here. You must have fire and light, and there seems no one to bring you either.'

Alice's exclamation of gratitude was as sincere as it was eager, but Colonel Myddleton said no more. He placed the lamp conveniently for her, and then proceeded silently to light the fire and generally arrange the room, doing it at the cost of more than one journey downstairs in search of necessaries. His campaigning experiences enabled him to guess pretty well what things were likely to be most urgently needed, and he managed to find them somewhere.

When he had done all he could, he came and stood by Bertie's bed. Alice, with Eliza's help, had meanwhile not only

sponged away the ghastly stains from the child's head and face, and tied a handkerchief over the wound, but by an unsparing use of scissors had managed to undress him; and as he now lay quietly in his bed he might have been supposed to be comfortable, but for his incessant muttering and moaning. He opened his eyes occasionally, but did not seem to recognise either Alice or Eliza, and said nothing intelligible.

'I have done all I dared,' said Alice, looking up anxiously for an opinion. 'I only hope I have not done too much. But I longed to make him a little more comfortable, and we scarcely moved him at all. The whole of one side is badly bruised, but I do not think there is any serious injury anywhere.'

'You could not have done better, so far, I am sure,' replied Colonel Myddleton, feeling the child's pulse as he spoke. 'The

real difficulties are all to come, I fear, for there has evidently been a terrible shock to the nerves. Broken bones would have been less difficult to deal with.'

Alice's eyes filled with tears as she looked at the unconscious child, whose delicate health and bright spirits had made him a general pet; but at this moment there was a call from the nursery, and she roused herself at once.

'There is Miss Dot calling, Eliza,' she said. 'Go back to the nursery now, and stay there, unless I come for you. But be very careful not to frighten her. Tell her *nothing* but that we have put Bertie to bed, and that I am going to stay with him; so she may go quietly to sleep, and be ready in the morning to help to nurse him.'

Eliza promised obedience, and departed to her post in the nursery.

Alice turned instantly to Colonel Myddleton with an appeal for further instructions. Simply to watch and wait seemed almost unbearable to her.

He saw this, and made one or two suggestions which he knew to be harmless, though he had little hope of their being of any use.

She was moving instantly to carry them out, when she was stopped by his saying :

‘But first tell me what messages you wish taken to Earnscliffe. Who shall come to you? Your own maid? Would she be useful?’

‘You are going!’ Alice exclaimed, ignoring his last words in the blank dismay caused by the idea of being left alone. Then recollecting herself, she added hastily: ‘I beg your pardon. It is late, I know. Will you kindly explain it all

to papa, and say that I must stay here for the present, and that I should like Marryatt to come to me at once.'

'I will tell him so,' answered Colonel Myddleton. 'But I am not going. How could you imagine it possible that I should leave you till you have proper help and protection? I shall send that boy over with a note to Mr. Brandon.'

'Ben? But oh! surely he is gone long ago for Dr. Wickham? *That* must come before everything. I thought you said you had sent him?'

'No; time was too precious for that. I told my own man to drive on instantly to Baron's Bridge as fast as he could, and to bring Dr. Wickham back with him. I will go now and write to your father. I suppose I shall find materials somewhere downstairs.'

He hurried away without giving Alice

time to answer, and she again gave all her attention to her patient, in whom, after a while, there was a decided change, for he first looked at her with evident recognition, and then asked what had happened.

For the moment Alice rejoiced at such unhopèd-for improvement, but when returning recollection brought on convulsive paroxysms of wild terror, which she found it impossible to soothe, she was in despair; for until the doctor should come she was utterly helpless. Even such simple remedies as she would have ventured to try on her own responsibility were not within her reach; everything that might have been of service appeared to have been put away and locked up, and it flashed upon her with an agony of self-reproach for not having thought of it before, that Dr. Wickham would not find even the most ordinary medicines at his disposal,

and that *whatever* he might order would have to be sent for either from Baron's Bridge or Earnscliffe, which must entail great loss of precious time.

Then it occurred to her that it was possible, though scarcely likely, that Ben had not yet been despatched with Colonel Myddleton's note to her father, in which case she might add a request to have such things as she knew were almost certain to be wanted sent to her at once.

Bertie was now comparatively quiet, having sunk into a sort of stupor, which she thought very alarming; but she dared not leave him even for the moment needed to call Colonel Myddleton.

She rang the bell very gently, trusting that in the empty, silent house even the slight sound it made would reach his ears wherever he might be, without any risk of being heard in the nursery.

He came instantly, and asked if the child was worse.

‘I hardly know,’ Alice replied. ‘Is Ben gone to Earnscliffe?’

‘Yes; some time ago. But he cannot be back for another half-hour at least.’

She told him all that she had just so tardily recollected; and then found that he had foreseen the difficulty, and had sent a line to Dr. Wickham by his servant, stating the sort of case and the circumstances, and asking him to bring with him such medicines and other things as he was most likely to need immediately. He had also begged Mr. Brandon to send from Earnscliffe a few things that would certainly be wanted.

‘You think of everything!’ exclaimed Alice. ‘What *should* I have done if you had not come with me!’

‘I have had more experience than you


have,' he replied, 'and so I detected the barrenness of the land at once. How do you think him, now?' he added as they went together to the child's bedside.

Alice told him exactly what had happened since he had left the room, for Bertie was now wandering again ; he appeared quite unconscious of their presence, and would certainly not understand what was said. Colonel Myddleton looked down at him with grave, sad compassion, but he did not speak. He only began silently to help Alice, who had resumed her work even as she spoke; and for the next half-hour they patiently tended the poor little boy, trying to relieve the pain in his head and to cool the burning fever, which was rapidly coming on, by keeping the bandage round his head constantly wetted, bathing the hot hands, and moistening the parched lips.

The welcome sound of wheels was heard

at last, and Colonel Myddleton left the room, but it proved to be only the Earnscliffe luggage-cart bringing Alice's maid with liberal supplies of all that had been asked for, as well as with everything which was in her opinion necessary for her mistress's comfort. She was a sensible, practical, middle-aged woman, fully equal to making herself useful in such an emergency as the present, and Colonel Myddleton saw at once, to his great satisfaction, that Alice would have help as efficient as any mere servant could give.

Dr. Wickham arrived only a few minutes later, long before they had ventured to expect him; but being most fortunately at home, he had come off instantly in Colonel Myddleton's dog-cart, leaving his own man to take on the message to the truant servants at the further end of the town, and then to follow him. He was a clever, experienced



kind-hearted man, much above the ordinary level of a country doctor; but he was not quite gentleman enough to refrain from a look and word of surprise at the certainly somewhat strange state of things to which he had been summoned. Passing and slight though it was, Colonel Myddleton was annoyed by it for Alice's sake; but he saw, with quick full recognition of the true innate delicacy revealed by the trait, that she was too perfectly unconscious even to notice it, and too intensely absorbed in the painful realities of the case to have a thought to bestow on commonplace conventionalities.

Dr. Wickham's verdict, after a most careful examination of Bertie, was much what they had expected. The injuries were not in themselves of any importance, but might become so when complicated by the nervous fever which there was every reason

to fear must have its course, and in the case of so delicate a child there was ground for the gravest anxiety, though there was room for hope that skill and care might bring him through, without permanent damage either to mind or body. Dr. Wickham did all that he could, and then gave to Alice, whom he had known from her childhood and could thoroughly trust, full directions as to all that was to be done until he returned in the morning.

Then Marryatt was left in charge for the time, and Dr. Wickham accompanied Alice to the nursery, while Colonel Myddleton went downstairs to see what was happening there, for they had reason to believe that the servants had by this time come home. Alice told Dr. Wickham all that poor little Dot had gone through, and also what she had said about the management of the baby.

They found Dot asleep, hot and restless, no doubt, but not apparently threatened with any illness, and a word of advice as to what to do if she should not seem well in the morning was all that was requisite.

As to the baby, a boy of fifteen months old, Dr. Wickham soon satisfied himself beyond a doubt that he was drugged, and Eliza, on being questioned, admitted that Parker often gave him medicine 'to quiet him because his teeth troubled him so,' and that it had done him a great deal of good. That it had ensured sleep was only too obvious, and among the ruins of the same unlucky box that Alice had before so unceremoniously broken open in search of the garret-keys, she now pounced on a small bottle which completed the evidence as fully as was necessary for private conviction.

It was, however, undoubtedly an awkward dilemma, and Dr. Wickham

waited for Alice to speak. After a moment's pause she said :

‘ We must consult Colonel Myddleton ;’ and telling Eliza to lock the door and to allow no one, not even Parker, to enter the room till she came back, she asked Dr. Wickham to accompany her in search of him.

On the stairs they met him coming to look for them, and a hurried council was at once held.

‘ What did you find downstairs ?’ asked Alice, speaking first.

Colonel Myddleton reported as concisely as possible that the servants had returned, that they were all sober, and, Parker excepted, were quiet and civil, sorry for what had happened, and anxious now to be useful. There was, after all, no very great harm in what had been done as far as *they* were concerned, and he had contented him-

self with urging upon them to do their best now, if they wished to be leniently dealt with when their master and mistress came home.

The real delinquent had been troublesome. Parker, evidently conscious that no excuse for her conduct was possible, had tried to carry matters off with a high hand, and had had recourse to insolent self-assertion, loudly declaring herself to be responsible only to Mrs. Chaloner, who had left her children in her charge with the fullest confidence in her, as was only natural after such recommendations as hers, and protesting that she would not put up with any impertinent interference in *her* nursery, from any lady—or gentleman either.

‘It was of no use to argue with a woman like that,’ Colonel Myddleton added, ‘nor did I know what to say ; so I told her not

to talk nonsense, and not to attempt to enter "her nursery" until I had seen Miss Brandon and ascertained what she wished about it. I reminded her that she had better not make her case worse than it was, as her only chance of escaping prosecution, on more than one very serious charge, lay in behaving well now and giving no trouble. That frightened her, I think, and she subsided into silence. Now, we must settle what is to be done.'

A rapid discussion followed. Summarily to dismiss another person's 'highly-recommended' head-nurse was no doubt a strong measure, but Alice professed herself willing to be responsible for doing so under the circumstances, and indeed declared it to be essential if she were to undertake the care of the children for the present. Parker was a clever woman and an experienced nurse, no doubt, but she could not be

allowed even to see the poor little victim of her selfish tyranny, nor could she be trusted with the baby ; while Dot, who would probably need very judicious care after her recent excitement, and during Bertie's illness, hated her with very sufficient cause.

Alice insisted upon it that she must go as early in the morning as was possible, upon which Dr. Wickham proposed to take her back with him to Baron's Bridge at once, where, if she chose, she might await Mr. and Mrs. Chaloner's return, and then make good her cause with them if she could.

This was settled, and the decision announced to Parker as admitting of no appeal. She was sufficiently frightened to submit tolerably quietly, and was sent immediately to collect such of her property as she could take away at a few minutes'

notice, and to lock up the boxes left to be sent after her.

‘Another thing, Miss Brandon,’ said Dr. Wickham, during the delay this occasioned. ‘I hope we shall pull him through, but it will be touch-and-go, poor little man, and his parents should be here as soon as possible. I will telegraph to them the first thing in the morning if you will give me the address.’

Alice’s answer came sadly and reluctantly.

‘Mrs. Chaloner is on her way home from Norway in a friend’s yacht, and could give no address. She cannot be communicated with till she gets home—and that will not be for a week, at least.’

Dr. Wickham’s grunt was expressive of much the same sentiments as Colonel Myddleton’s rigid silence.

‘And Mr. Chaloner? Is he with her?’

‘No. Where *he* is, I do not know. Perhaps Dixon does.’

Dixon was summoned, but knew only that his master was gone to some of ‘them furrin races,’ and he had no idea as to when he would be back. He had left no address but his London club, and any letter or telegram sent there might, or might not, be forwarded abroad—Dixon ‘could not take upon himself to say.’

‘Well, I will send a telegram there on the chance,’ said Dr. Wickham. ‘I shall be here again early to-morrow, Miss Brandon, and you have full directions meanwhile. You are sure that you can manage the nursery as well as the little boy without that woman’s help?’

‘Better than with it,’ was the reply. ‘Marryatt will undertake the babies, I know. She began life as our nursery-maid, and will be quite competent. I shall not

leave Bertie to-night myself, and if I should need help I can have it from one of the other servants.'

'Then the sooner I am off the better. But don't overdo yourself at the beginning. I must trust to Colonel Myddleton to see that you take proper food and rest.'

Alice was already nearly out of the room on her way back to her patient, and the last words with their accompanying smile were lost upon her; but Colonel Myddleton both heard and saw, and was intensely annoyed.

'Miss Brandon's maid will take care of her, I have no doubt,' he said stiffly. 'I do not see that I can be of any further use now, and I am going back to Thornycroft immediately. Lady Elizabeth Randolph will, I am sure, come over to-morrow as soon as she hears what has happened, and wiser counsel than hers Miss Brandon could not have.'

Dr. Wickham took the hint, though more convinced than before that his surmise was well founded.

‘Quite so—quite so,’ he said hastily. ‘I wonder if that woman is ready. I can’t wait all night for her.’

He hustled out into the hall, and a very few minutes later Colonel Myddleton saw him drive off. His own dog-cart came to the door just at that moment. He turned to re-enter the house before starting, but checked himself and stood for a moment or two in the doorway, as if uncertain what to do. Then, taking out a card, he wrote a few words on it in pencil and gave it to the servant, desired that it should be sent up to Miss Brandon immediately, and, mounting at once to his seat, drove off rapidly.

Dixon stared after him in bewildered surprise.

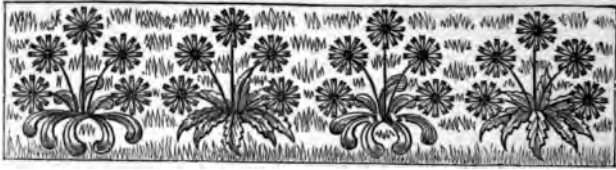
‘Whatever’s up now, I wonder?’ he

muttered to himself as he closed and fastened the door. 'He's a kindhearted chap enough, but he'll not catch me believing that Master Bertie's accident is at the bottom of such a taking as he's in at this minute.'

The man's next step was of course to read what was written on the card, but it told him nothing. There were merely these words:

'I will not disturb you by asking to see you again before I go, as I do not think that I can help you further at present. I shall hope to hear a good account tomorrow.—R. M.'





CHAPTER III.

THE breakfast hour at Thornycroft was not early, but the meal was nearly over when Colonel Myddleton joined the party, with the apology for being late that he had not reached home till between three and four o'clock.

‘So we heard,’ said George Randolph, ‘and my mother and Katharine are dying to get at the truth of the tale of horrors which has reached their ears through your groom and their maids—highly embellished, no doubt.’

Colonel Myddleton gave the shortest and simplest account of the night's adventures that could well be given; but even when thus told, the story sounded bad enough, and excited much interest and many comments.

'What a blessing you must have been to poor Alice!' said Lady Elizabeth.

'It was just as well, perhaps, that she should have the protection of a man's presence for those first hours,' replied Colonel Myddleton; 'and anyhow, being there, of course one could not leave her till one had seen daylight through the muddle, but she showed herself quite equal to the occasion.'

'You left her quite alone, at last, then?'

'Yes. I could do no more for her, and was decidedly better out of the way. The servants left are quite under her control, and if she should want more help as time

goes on, she can have it from Earnscliffe. She has a most arduous, anxious task before her, though, I am afraid; and unfortunately Mrs. Brandon is too much of an invalid to be of any use.'

'I shall go over at once and see what I can do for her, poor child,' said Lady Elizabeth. 'If I find that it would be a help to her, I will stay for a day or two.'

'Thank you—that will be extremely kind,' said Colonel Myddleton so quickly and warmly as to betray his own strong interest in the matter, and make it appear that he accepted the kindness as a personal favour. Then suddenly checking himself, he added in a different tone, 'I am sure she will be grateful for any help that you are good enough to give her. She is quite aware of her own inexperience.'

'You will come with me, Katharine, will you not, and insense her as to the babies?'

asked Lady Elizabeth, as the party began to disperse. 'Your experiences in that line are more recent than mine. You can call at Earnsliffe, too, on your way home, and see Jessie, if you like.'

Mrs. Randolph acquiesced, and the carriage was ordered to be ready as soon as possible.

'And you, Roger?' said Lady Elizabeth, turning back after everyone else had left the room. 'Are you coming with us to see how all is going on this morning?'

'I? Oh no!' he replied. 'I could do no good, and I shall hear all about it when Katharine comes back. The boys and I go up to Brianskirk again to-morrow, you know, and I can call there as we pass to make proper inquiries and perhaps see *you* for a moment.'

'You think that the case is grave enough to make it certain that I shall stay?'

‘There is small doubt of that, I fear,’ he answered. ‘You will be invaluable to Miss Brandon—in more ways than she will ever guess, I hope,’ he added hurriedly. ‘All that happened yesterday afternoon and last night will of course flood the whole countryside with gossip. Nothing can stop it, one knows, but your going to her in this way will modify it.’

‘True,’ said Lady Elizabeth. ‘And when the gossip has been deprived of its sting surely no one need be troubled by it. It will soon die a natural death.’

‘But meanwhile that prating old doctor and that fiend of a nurse will of course make the most they can of it!’ and Colonel Myddleton walked abruptly away, leaving Lady Elizabeth to wonder what could have occasioned a mood so strangely unlike him in its bitter irritation.

As Lady Elizabeth and her daughter-in-

law were on terms of the frankest affection and intimacy, it was only natural that during their drive to Clifton Grange they should fully discuss the recent events in all their bearings; and as no breach of confidence on either side was involved in doing so, they of course included Colonel Myddleton's peculiar manner that morning and their respective surmises as to its cause.

‘Granting even that he really is in love with Alice Brandon, don't you think that he may have found yesterday's exhibition at Atherley rather too much for him?’

The speaker was Mrs. Randolph. Lady Elizabeth would not accept the explanation as satisfactory.

‘Yesterday can have told him nothing that he did not virtually know before,’ she said.

‘Except perhaps that the drawbacks to

such a marriage would be greater than ~~he~~ could after all make up his mind to encounter, and in that case surely it is better that he should act promptly and decidedly.'

'Unquestionably,' replied Lady Elizabeth warmly. 'A half-hearted love is the most worthless of rubbish! You need not be afraid of my meddling, Katharine. I would not try by word or look to hinder his giving her up now, if he wishes to do it, for that in itself would prove him unworthy of such a wife as Alice would have made him—but he will have much to answer for.'

'You think she would feel it very much?' said Mrs. Randolph. 'Yes—I can believe that she would. I fancy she has a passionate, vehement nature.'

'She is strong enough in all ways to suffer—and to gain by it—if only the suf-

fering were wholesome,' was Lady Elizabeth's reply. 'But *that* this would not be, for there can be no adequate excuse for his drawing back now at the eleventh hour—and I should dread the effect on her of feeling herself so treated.'

After this she was silent for some time, and only spoke again as the carriage turned in at the gate of Clifton Grange. Then she said resolutely:

'I *will* not believe Roger capable of doing this until he has done it. It would be too unlike him.'

Dr. Wickham was just going away after a long visit, but he willingly lingered to give Lady Elizabeth all the information she desired. The little boy was, he said, undoubtedly in a very critical state, but he was going on as well as he could have ventured to hope. Miss Brandon was proving an admirable nurse, but would be

all the better for some friend to insist on her taking reasonable care of herself.

When Dr. Wickham had ridden away, Dixon conducted the two ladies to the drawing-room where Alice was. She sprang up from the writing-table to give Lady Elizabeth the warmest possible welcome.

'We heard all about it from Roger this morning, my dear,' said Lady Elizabeth, 'and I told him at once that I should come and look after you.'

'He was so kind and helpful through it all last night,' answered Alice. 'I don't know how I should have been able to bear all those first helpless, dreary hours of waiting without him.'

Mrs. Randolph asked about Dot and the baby.

Alice reported that Dot was well, though looking fagged after all her excitement, and more precociously anxious about Bertie

than was good for her, or quite easy to deal with. Mrs. Brandon had sent Jessie Leigh and the two little Carrs (with their old nurse) to carry off all the children, except the baby, for a picnic in the woods. This was a great treat to them, and would occupy Dot's mind healthily, while it would leave the house quiet. As to the baby, Dr. Wickham had said that he saw no reason for thinking him permanently injured by Parker's mode of treatment, but he had warned Alice that he would be restless and troublesome at night for some time—until, in fact, he ceased to miss the opiate to which he had become accustomed.

‘Bad nights will bring fidgety days,’ Alice concluded; ‘and I don't suppose that Marryatt, who is with Bertie now, will be able to help me much after to-day. I was wondering what I ought to do about getting some one else to come to us. Can you

recommend a nurse, Lady Elizabeth? You know so much about them.'

'I came intending to stay myself, if you would like to have me; and between us, if the servants are decently helpful and willing, I think we can nurse him without further assistance.'

'*You* will stay with me! It would be an unspeakable comfort. But—I don't know—I could scarcely make you even tolerably comfortable, I am afraid. The room Bertie is in is the only one at all fit for you.'

'My dear child, the idea of talking to an amateur nurse about her own comforts! Leave such stipulations to the professionals. We must have one, too, if necessary, but that remains to be seen. Anyhow, I think you want some old woman like me to look after you for the present.'

Alice was much too thankful to have

such help to protest further, and a moment's rapid reflection convinced her that, by dint of a little trouble, sufficiently tolerable comfort might be contrived.

It was settled, therefore, that Lady Elizabeth should stay—at any rate for a day or two; and she speedily made herself quite at home.

As it was known that Jessie Leigh was out for the day, it was useless for her aunt to go to Earnscliffe to see her; and therefore, after waiting at Clifton Grange just long enough to let the horses rest and to have luncheon, Mrs. Randolph drove back to Thornycroft.

She took with her a much-increased respect for Alice, whose quiet good sense and simple, unpretending devotion to her self-imposed duty impressed her very favourably, though one thing which she had seen had puzzled her a good deal.

She had begged Alice to make her of some use during her necessary stay, and had readily undertaken to write one or two notes of apology for the inevitable giving up of various engagements. She had been left alone in the drawing-room to do this, and, on taking the place at the writing-table which Alice herself had previously occupied, she had seen with surprise that, lying with some notes, and some orders for Baron's Bridge shops, were two letters—one to Madame d'Yffiniac, the other to 'The Hon. Eliot St. Aubyn.'

It seemed to Mrs. Randolph odd that anyone absorbed in nursing a critical case of illness should either find time or have inclination for mere correspondence with a friend like Madame d'Yffiniac, who could not (as far as she knew) have anything to do with the matter; and though it was perhaps right and natural that, failing the

possibility of communicating with the parents, Alice should write to some of the child's nearest relations to let them know what had happened, it could not have been necessary to single out from among them a young man—and one, too, who was generally supposed to be a lover. Mrs. Randolph could not think this proceeding quite consistent with the sort of attachment to Roger Myddleton which Alice's manner certainly seemed to betray, and in which Lady Elizabeth believed so thoroughly as to dread the effect of any disappointment for her.

It was explicable only as one of the 'ways' of those girls who could never be satisfied to let a man alone over whom they once knew themselves to have any power, even though they might seriously prefer another—and it was not a 'way' which Mrs. Randolph could easily tolerate

in the girl who was in all probability to be Roger's wife.

Alice, with all her angles and impetuosities, had always interested Mrs. Randolph extremely; but the interest was coupled with a good deal of disapprobation, unsoftened by real comprehension of the working of a mind and nature so unlike her own, and so differently circumstanced.

Mrs. Randolph was kind-hearted and liberal-minded, but she had the limited perceptions and sympathies consequent on never having herself had either duties to fulfil or temptations to resist, or even troubles to bear which really taxed her strength.

Such anxieties and sorrows as had fallen to her lot had been free from even the slightest touch of bitterness, and had always been shared by those she loved

the best. Her own path had been smooth and flooded with sunshine (thanks, perhaps, partly to her sweet, serene, dutiful nature), and she had scarcely the force of imagination needed to make due allowance for the stumbling progress of one who, like Alice, had had to make her way as she could by uncertain light and over all sorts of obstructions.

At the present moment she would possibly have judged Alice more leniently had she heard what passed between her and Lady Elizabeth immediately after her own departure.

When Dixon came to ask for the notes that were to be sent to Baron's Bridge, Alice gave him all the letters at the same time, telling him that there would be nothing more for the post.

Then, as she and Lady Elizabeth went up to Bertie's room, she said :

‘I had written to Barbe d’Yffiniac just before you came. She is one of the party on board Mr. Annesley Mainwaring’s yacht, and *she* is certain to have her letters sent to meet her somewhere if it is possible, so that through her Juliet may perhaps hear of what has happened in time to hurry her return home a little. Dr. Wickham asked me this morning if I had thought of writing to the Chaloners, and reminded me that Bertie, poor little pet, is the heir. That is true, but I would rather not write to them if it can be helped, for I am sure they would not really care except for that sort of reason; yet some of them might choose to come.’

‘And under the circumstances I must say that it would be quite right that they *should* come,’ replied Lady Elizabeth.

‘True. But they could do no good,’ said Alice; ‘and they are always so ready

to pounce on any opening for blaming Juliet that I don't want to give them one.'

'I can understand that,' answered Lady Elizabeth. 'It would be rather distracting, too, to have Lady Chaloner down upon us, setting us all to rights. Still, such near relations have certainly a claim to be told of a thing like this.'

'Of course they have. But the St. Aubyns are quite as near, and have an equal claim, and I know them much better; so I have settled it with my conscience by writing to Mr. St. Aubyn, who is really fond of Juliet and the children, and who will know that he may trust me both to do my best and to tell him the truth as to how it all is. I have asked him to tell anybody else that he thinks ought to be told, and also to find Mr. Chaloner if he can. He may know where he is, or at any rate how to find out.'

Lady Elizabeth, knowing less of the current gossip of society than her daughter-in-law, and fully understanding Alice, agreed that she had got out of the difficulty very well by thus shifting the responsibility to Mr. St. Aubyn, and that nothing more remained to be done in the matter except to nurse the child to the best of their power until one or both of the parents should come to relieve them of the charge.

Colonel Myddleton called the next afternoon to ask how Bertie was, but without any intention of going in. He was, however, told that the ladies had said that if he came they would see him, and this left him no option.

He found Lady Elizabeth in the drawing-room, surrounded by children, and very busy superintending Dot's manufacture of a frock for her doll, while at the same time

helping Jack and Ettie to construct an elaborate farm-yard by means of their box of bricks and the remains of a Noah's ark.

Dot welcomed him cordially, with a quaint combination of the formal courtesy of a little woman of the world and the frankness of a gracious baby. She thanked him for coming, informed him that Bertie was much better, and she hoped would be quite well before mamma came back; and announced with great dignity that she helped to nurse him.

'Yes; we all have to make ourselves useful,' said Lady Elizabeth; 'and Dot takes her turn when there is anything she can do. Run to the nursery now, dear, and tell Eliza to come for the little ones, and then tell Miss Brandon that Colonel Myddleton is here, and that I will come to Bertie.'

Colonel Myddleton began a protest against Miss Brandon being disturbed, which Lady Elizabeth cut short, saying :

‘She wants to see you, I know. Her father was here this morning. I am afraid you will think that the nursing has told on her a good deal, but it was impossible to help it while the child was so ill as he was yesterday afternoon and all last night. He is sleeping quietly now, and I hope we may really believe that the worst is over.’

‘I hope *you* are not over-doing yourself?’

‘I? oh no! There is nothing left for me to do but to amuse the children, try to make Alice take care of herself, and generally give her the benefit of my experience.’

Eliza now appeared for the children, and Lady Elizabeth left the room with them. Almost immediately [afterwards Alice came

in looking rather pale and tired, but even prettier than usual because just a little shy, though determined not to give way to it.

‘I am so glad that you came instead of sending,’ she said, ‘for I wanted particularly to see you that I might thank you for all you did for me the other afternoon and night, and most of all for coming with me from Atherley. Though I knew all the time that I could not be grateful enough to you for doing it, I never even tried to thank you—I was too disheartened altogether at first—and afterwards all this put everything else out of my head. But if you knew what the difference was to me of feeling that you were there, you would not think that I did not appreciate your coming.’

She was too much in earnest, too determined to say what she had to say, for Colonel Myddleton’s repeated attempts to

stop her to take any effect until she had poured it all out.

‘I should hope that any of your friends who saw the state of the case, and knew you well enough to understand what it must be to you, would have done the same,’ he said at last when she paused. ‘I am very glad that I was able to give you even that little help. Has your father had any answer from Franklyn?’

‘Yes. Papa has been here to-day to tell me that he had a telegram from Dr. Franklyn this morning, agreeing to take charge of Dick as you suggested.’

‘I am glad of that. It will be the best for you all,’ said Colonel Myddleton.

‘Papa is going to take Dick to London at once and place him under Dr. Franklyn’s care, and make all the further arrangements as quickly as he can.’

‘And your brother agrees to it all?’

‘I have not been at home, you know, or seen Dick, but he has no will when he comes into direct contact with papa. He cannot even resist. He knows, too, that there is no help for it.’

‘How will Mrs. Brandon bear it?’

‘Papa says he has told her merely that he thinks Dick is taking harm both in body and mind from the idle luxurious life he has been leading lately, and that he hopes this plan will be good for him in all ways. She approves, he says, and whether she guesses the real reason for it, or not, I cannot tell without seeing her. If she *did* know the facts she would feel, as I do, how much we owe you for suggesting the plan and getting it carried out.’

‘I hope it may prove successful,’ said Colonel Myddleton, ‘and anyhow I am glad that you are safe for the present from any repetition of such scenes.’

They had both been standing all this time, just as they had first met, in the middle of the room, and now, instead of showing any intention of prolonging his visit, Colonel Myddleton took up his hat from the table near him.

‘I must not keep you,’ he said, ‘and my boys are waiting for me at the gate. Your worst troubles are over now, I hope, both as regards your brother and the poor little fellow here; and Lady Elizabeth will, I know, do her best to make you take proper care of yourself.’

‘She is kindness itself, and it is the greatest comfort to have her here,’ replied Alice. ‘But before you go, Colonel Myddleton, there is one thing—you must expect to pay the usual penalty of doing much by being asked to do more—and——’

‘What is it?’ he said abruptly, as she

paused. 'Anything that I can possibly do for you shall be done.'

Resolutions to be coolly courteous and to allow strong feeling no expression being more easily made beforehand than kept at the moment of trial, Colonel Myddleton spoke with an impetuous warmth which brought the colour to Alice's face, for it seemed an assurance not to be doubted of the strongest interest in her. So far as that, she interpreted his words and manner quite correctly, but every further inference was mistaken. He had made up his mind before he came that, let the wrench cost him what it might, he would not see Alice again after this until they could meet as mere acquaintances. His nephews were to return to school in a day or two, and he had resolved to leave Brianskirk at the same time, and not to return there for so long that the intimacy with the Brandons

would be quite effectually broken. He would greatly have preferred to have avoided even this meeting, but that had been impossible without marked rudeness, and he had faced the situation, difficult and disagreeable as it was, rather than excite comment by trying to escape from it.

The result had been a quarter of an hour even more intolerable to him than he had expected it to be. Self-reproach for past imprudence and thoughtlessness grew keener every moment, even while his resolution remained unshaken; and thus at the last he caught eagerly at any opening for doing Alice some tangible service. It would be a possible relief to his conscience for having placed her in a position so painful as he knew now that hers would be when he was gone. He repented his words almost before they were spoken; but

neither words nor manner could be recalled, or even explained away.

‘It is not exactly anything for myself,’ Alice replied. ‘It is about Jessie. I dare say you heard of my skirmish with Mrs. Irwine about her the other day? Yes—I see you did. It had never occurred to me before to suppose that there could be any need to guard against that sort of thing for her, and my head was too full of other troubles to take it in then, even if I were not always rubbed the wrong way by vulgar prim prudery of that kind. I have thought about it since, however, and I am not at all sure that I have not been careless and imprudent. I find from Dot’s chatter that Mr. Sherwood was one of their picnic party at St. Edmund’s Well yesterday—and papa said quite casually this morning that he had left them at lawn-tennis. I suppose it *is* scarcely wise to let all that go

on quite as much as I have done lately—partly, I confess, because it was a relief to myself—though I should naturally have thought that there could not be much danger—’ and she stopped with a slight smile, which was hardly flattering to Mr. Sherwood and which Colonel Myddleton quite understood.

‘Tastes differ,’ he replied, ‘and I can fancy that there may be some little risk for *Jessie* of a schoolgirl entanglement ; but it is too late to interfere now. Sherwood must go back to his school-work next week, and so there can have been no great harm done, even if they have been sentimentalising a little in your absence.’

‘But could not you manage to take her away from Earnscliffe for the remainder of the time? She is practically alone there now, you see.’

‘Have you not heard that your uncle



and Bertha are coming home to-morrow instead of next Thursday? There is some meeting which Carr has to attend, I believe, and the day has been changed quite lately. It is now to be on Saturday.'

'Really? Then I need not have troubled you about it. But perhaps you might as well give Mrs. Carr a hint of this?'

'No,' replied Colonel Myddleton. 'Bertha would make commotion enough to drive the poor child distracted, and worry her into keeping up the affair, if there is anything in it, whereas if she is let alone she will probably forget it all before Christmas.'

There was a pause after this. Colonel Myddleton was trying to bring himself to tell Alice that he should not see her again, as he was going away for an indefinite time, but he could not do it. He felt that he could not bear to see the pain which yet he had now no choice but to inflict—and the

only result of the attempt was that he at last took leave of her hurriedly with a degree of nervous agitation so unlike his usual manner as to convey to her mind the last impression he had intended. She saw in it only a proof that he loved her, though he did not think the time had come to tell her so, and she remained for some few minutes after he had gone in a happy dream.

He meanwhile walked down to the gate to join the boys, and drove up to Brianskirk with them, feeling sadder and more humiliated than he had ever felt in his life before, and barely able to keep up a tolerable appearance of interest in their boyish chatter about cricket-matches, shooting-parties, and ponies.



CHAPTER IV.

WHATEVER Mrs. Randolph might think of Alice's discretion in choosing Mr. St. Aubyn as a medium of communication with the rest of the family, her letter answered its purpose. It took a couple of days to reach him, for it had to be forwarded to the house where he was staying; but when he received it on Thursday afternoon (the accident having happened on Monday night) he at once took the measures which Alice had hoped that he might be able to take. She received a note from him on Friday morning, abund-

ing in acknowledgments of all she had done, and saying that he had telegraphed immediately to FitzroyChaloner, who was in Paris.

Later in the day she had a telegram from Mr. Chaloner telling her that he and his wife would leave Paris by that evening's mail train, and that as they should travel without stopping they should be at home on Saturday afternoon. Madame d'Yffiniac would accompany them.

It was by the merest chance that Mr. St. Aubyn knew his brother-in-law's address at that moment, but he did know it, and most fortunately Mr. Chaloner happened to know where his wife was. She and Madame d'Yffiniac had at the last minute decided on leaving Mr. Mainwaring's yacht and making their journey home as much as possible by rail—a plan which almost as a matter of course was so arranged as to include a few

days in Paris as its last stage. There Mr. Chaloner was already staying, and immediately on receiving Mr. St. Aubyn's telegram he took it to the hotel where the two ladies had their rooms. No details were given, and no attempt had been made to soften the facts.

The only thing to be done was to start for home as soon as they could. This was just settled when Madame d'Yffiniac came to Mrs. Chaloner's room bringing Alice's letter to herself, which had reached her home at Quimperlé the previous day, and had been instantly forwarded with her other letters to Paris. Short though the letter was, it gave a concise account of all that had happened ; but though it said that the child was then going on well, it had been written three days ago, and no one could guess what course his illness might since have taken.

Mrs. Chaloner was almost frantic. She

was fonder of all her children than she pretended to be, and Bertie was her most vulnerable point. She was so utterly crushed by grief, anxiety, and self-reproach for having left them in such keeping, that she was nearly incapable of rational thought or action, and Mr. Chaloner was heartily thankful to Madame d'Yffiniac for offering to go home with them and give what help she could.

It was a long and terrible journey in all the anguish of suspense. It did not occur to Mrs. Chaloner that she could hear again until she got home, and her husband thought it better not to ask that any message should meet them while on their way, lest it should only be such as to increase her distress. As it was, the last news was good as far as it went.

Madame d'Yffiniac had never before believed that she could nearly like Mr.

Chaloner. Many and grave though his faults might be, selfish and low-toned though he had proved himself in so many ways, he was neither heartless nor stupid. This news was a shock to him on his own account, for he loved his children, and he seemed fully to understand what it must be to his wife. He devoted himself entirely to taking care of her, and this common sorrow seemed for the moment so completely to bridge over the recent years of estrangement between them, that Madame d'Yffiniac, on whom no traits of character that came under her observation were ever lost, found herself more than once wondering whether they were not more equally responsible for the want of harmony between them than she had ever allowed herself to believe.

As they travelled down to the north by an express train on Saturday they stopped at one of the large stations at the same

time as the corresponding train going southwards, by which Colonel Myddleton was a passenger. The two gentlemen met on the platform, and Mr. Chaloner at once carried off Colonel Myddleton to speak to his wife, who had not left her seat.

‘Juliet!’ he said, ‘I have just met Myddleton, who says he saw Wickham this morning at Baron’s Bridge, and heard that Bertie is going on well.’

Mrs. Chaloner raised herself, looking so haggard and wretched that, in pity for her punishment, Colonel Myddleton could not but forgive her for the carelessness which he had hitherto so severely condemned. He felt really glad to be able to relieve her anxiety.

‘Is he out of danger?’ she asked eagerly.

‘They hope so. He has been very ill, and there is still a possible risk of relapse; but he is, so far, doing as well as possible,

and Dr. Wickham seems satisfied about him.'

'And the others?'

'They are all perfectly well, except the baby, and there is nothing wrong with him, Dr. Wickham says, but what a few days will put right.'

'Is Alice Brandon still with them?'

'She has never left them from the first. I am sure you may feel satisfied that you could not have done more for them your self; but it will be a relief from a great anxiety when she can resign her charge into your hands.'

'We owe her a great deal,' said Mrs. Chaloner. 'And I ought to thank *you* also, I know, though I am almost too bewildered to understand very clearly yet how it all happened. I am taking Alice a much more efficient help than myself, I am glad to say, and one whom she will

rejoice to see. I think you have never met our friend, Madame d'Yffiniac, who is so kindly going home with me.'

Colonel Myddleton glanced curiously at the corner where Madame d'Yffiniac was seated. She had a book in her hand, and had hitherto been leaning back quite silently, so that it had not occurred to him that she was one of the party. She moved now and returned his bow, but she did not take the trouble to speak, and he saw little more than that she was apparently a handsome woman, on rather a large scale. Through her veil he caught the outlines of a fine face, with the gleam of silvery hair, bright dark eyes and a rich complexion; but that was all.

'You are going south?' said Mrs. Chaloner.

'Yes. I am taking my boys back to school, and then perhaps I shall go abroad,' he replied.

A second warning bell now rang loudly, passengers for the up-train were peremptorily summoned to take their seats, and he hurried away, thinking to himself that he was glad that Madame d'Yffiniac was going to Clifton just now, for he knew what a pleasure it would be to Alice; but that though she was evidently a fine showy-looking woman, there was a great deal too much of her for his taste. He had almost as strong an antipathy to size in a woman as to 'advanced' views and self-assertion.

The travellers reached home early in the afternoon, and were most thankfully welcomed by Alice, who had remained at her post until they came. Lady Elizabeth had gone home the previous day, for everything was going on well, and Alice had succeeded in arranging for the temporary return of the excellent and devoted nurse who had recently left to be married.

The Chaloners showed themselves cordially and frankly grateful for all that Alice had done, and unhesitatingly gave their fullest support to all the arrangements she had made.

This was more than she had expected from Mr. Chaloner, with whom she had always been on terms of tacit antagonism—both on Dick's account and as a warm partisan of his wife's. She disliked and despised him, but she was constrained to admit that he was behaving well now, and showing (for the time) real consideration for his wife, as well as proper courtesy to herself, and genuine anxiety about the children's condition.

There were many protests when it was found that though she had stayed to receive them, Alice had settled to go home immediately afterwards. She was entreated to stay at least till the next day, but she was

not to be persuaded. She had already sent Marryatt back to Earnscliffe with all her belongings, and with a message to Mrs. Brandon that she herself should follow before dinner. When she left to walk home, Madame d'Yffiniac went a little way with her.

'Your coming is an unexpected pleasure, Barbe,' said Alice enthusiastically.

'It was the last thing I intended to do,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac; 'but it was impossible not to offer to come, under the circumstances. Your letter was sufficiently alarming.'

'Yes. Poor Juliet! But I really did not exaggerate anything.'

'If we had found the child still dangerously ill I should have stayed to help to nurse him; but, as it is, there is nothing for me to do, and I shall go home as soon as possible, for I have a great deal of work

before me which has been getting sadly behindhand lately.'

'But you will not go till you have paid us a little visit?' pleaded Alice. 'You will come to Earncliffe first, surely?'

'I should like to do so, dear child, but you must let me leave it open for the present. I shall see my way more clearly in a day or two.' Her eyes were scrutinising Alice's face as she spoke, and she added abruptly: 'Your cares and anxieties do not seem to have overwhelmed you, Alice. To look at you, one would almost say that you had enjoyed the week's adventures.'

'Barbe! how horrible!' cried Alice, but the deep blush that spread slowly over her face was conscious as well as indignant. She felt that the accusation was to a certain extent true, for notwithstanding both her home troubles and her real anxiety about

Bertie Chaloner, she had been happier during the past week than she had ever been before.

Madame d'Yffiniac was a keen observer. She liked to study every variety of nature ; but her probing-touch, though effective, was quick and light ; and having satisfied herself of the truth of her surmises, she had no wish to torment Alice by pursuing the subject.

'Don't look so horrified,' she said lightly. 'I meant no harm, I assure you. You had the relief of knowing from the beginning that all was going on well ; and what can be more justifiably exhilarating than the knowledge that you are doing useful work, and doing it well. It was lucky for Bertie, I suspect, that you were here rather than his mother. She was more completely knocked down by the shock than I should have expected her to be.'

‘The long suspense during the journey, without the power to do anything, must have been dreadful for her,’ said Alice. ‘*Only* to bear and wait must be maddening in such a case.’

‘Work, and the harder the better, is a great help in trouble, no doubt,’ replied Madame d’Yffiniac. ‘It was a terrible journey for her. Till we met Colonel Myddleton to-day we could not tell what might have been happening here since you wrote to me and to Mr. St. Aubyn last Tuesday.’

‘It was lucky that the boys were a day late in going back to school. They waited to see their mother.’

‘Your uncle and his bride have come home, then?’

‘They came on Thursday; but I have not seen them yet. Colonel Myddleton brought the boys to the rectory yesterday

to see her, and they all left again this morning.'

'One would have thought that boys of their age could have travelled alone,' said Madame d'Yffiniac.

'Oh, so they do,' answered Alice, laughing. 'He does not make them soft or silly at all; but I suppose it happened to suit him to go south at the same time. He said yesterday that he had business in London.'

'Very likely. Men always have, I think; and I remember he said something about going abroad.'


Somewhat to Madame d'Yffiniac's surprise, Alice answered at once quite composedly:

'Yes; I know they are intending to send Charlie Randolph to a foreign school soon; and he told me he should go and inspect some.'

‘A most devoted uncle!’ Madame d’Yffiniac exclaimed. ‘Well, Alice, will you come to see us to-morrow, or shall I come over to see you? I must be going back now.’

Alice begged that she would come to Earnscliffe, and this being settled, they parted.

Alice found abundant occupation for her thoughts during the rest of her way home. It was scarcely possible to her to believe that it was not yet a week since she and Jessie Leigh had driven to Atherley on the day of the cricket-match—so many events and so much emotion had been crowded into those few days. Her thoughts were naturally chiefly given to her own affairs, and though she saw that the prospect before her had its anxious side, she was on the whole extremely happy, for not a doubt of Colonel Myddleton’s affection for her



had crossed her mind since his coming to her in the garden at Earnsliffe on Monday evening.

Everything had tended to strengthen the impression she had then so gladly received ; and with perfect faith in him, she was content to wait till he should judge that the time had come to tell her of his love for her. She was indeed rather glad than sorry to postpone for the moment the fresh storms on her father's part which she should probably have to encounter, and which she fancied that Colonel Myddleton foresaw as clearly as she did, and would avert if possible.

She had seen him for a moment the previous afternoon when he had stopped at Clifton Grange on his way from Brianskirk to Earnsliffe Rectory, but as she happened to be in the garden when he drove up, she never knew that he had intended

only to make inquiries and leave a card without asking for her. The two young Randolphins were with him, and they had no time to spare, so that she was not surprised that he did not propose to come in.

He asked after Bertie, and heard that he was going on well, and that Alice was going home the next day as soon as the Chaloners arrived. He told Alice that he was going up to London with his nephews and should probably see her father and brother; but though he said nothing about returning, neither did he hint at intending not to do so. He did not feel that he could safely venture to touch on the subject with the boys and servants looking on and hearing every word.

Consequently, when he was gone, Alice was left with every false impression confirmed. Nothing could have been more conventional and commonplace than every

word that had been spoken, but she knew him too well not to detect suppressed emotion of some sort in each tone of his voice, and she trusted him too absolutely to interpret it rightly.

Having chosen the path by the river, Alice had to pass close by the rectory on her way home. She had time to spare, and thought she would do at once what must be done very soon, and call on Mrs. Carr. She knew that her uncle was absent for the day at a clerical meeting, and would not be at home till late in the evening, but that only made the attention to his wife more decided. Alice felt that she could never, under any circumstances, really like or trust this new aunt, but she intended for her uncle's sake to live on terms of friendship with her ; and possibly the fact of her being Colonel Myddleton's sister helped to strengthen the good resolution. She rang the door-bell,

a thing which she had never done before, and which marked the changed conditions of her intercourse with the house in future. The maid who answered the bell informed her that Mrs. Carr had gone to Thornycroft.

Alice was surprised, for Mrs. Carr's relations with the Randolphins had never been such, on her side, as to lead anyone to expect her to show them any remarkable cordiality, or even more than necessary courtesy. She asked for Miss Leigh, and was told that she was gone with her mother, and was to be left to stay at Thornycroft. This was stranger still, for Alice knew that no plan of the kind had even been under consideration yesterday, and it was what Mrs. Carr had always refused to allow, even when she had no such excuse to offer as her own recent long absence from her daughter. The maid looked mysterious and

important, and evidently longed to be questioned ; but she was new and young, and had rather a pert expression, and Alice would not encourage her to gossip by another word. She left a message that she had called and was sorry to miss Mrs. Carr, but hoped to see her the next day, and without asking for the children walked on to the hall, wondering what it could all mean.

The only thing she could think of was that Mrs. Carr must have taken alarm about Jessie's flirtation with Mr. Sherwood, which had perhaps come to her knowledge in some way, and that she was acting with all the impetuous folly with which her brother had prophesied that she would mismanage the matter. Alice was fond of Jessie, and was sorry for her if this were so—while she felt that no surer way could have been taken to drive a romantic child into determining to be a martyr to constancy.



CHAPTER V.

ALICE'S curiosity was soon gratified, for she found Mr. Sherwood sitting with her mother and imparting his troubles to her. He was too much excited and too boyishly full of his own woes to have any compunction as to inflicting his story a second time on Mrs. Brandon while repeating it to her daughter, and Alice soon knew all that had happened. She found, indeed, that her approving sympathy was reckoned as certain because of her encouragement of the constant easy

intercourse which had led to the present state of things.

It appeared that since Alice's going to Clifton, Jessie and Mr. Sherwood had spent almost all their time together; for though Mr. and Mrs. Carr had returned home on Thursday, Jessie and the children had only moved to the rectory on Friday afternoon. Colonel Myddleton and the two boys were there for that night, Mr. Sherwood had been asked to dinner almost as a necessary courtesy, and in the course of the evening he and Jessie had settled matters much to their own satisfaction, agreeing that he should call in the morning to see Mrs. Carr.

He had found her alone, for Colonel Myddleton and the boys had left early, and Mr. Carr had gone by the same train to the town where the meeting, which he had hurried home to attend, was to be held.

Mr. Sherwood had told his story fearlessly, with little doubt of obtaining Mrs. Carr's consent; but she had been scornful and indignant, harsh to Jessie and very rude to him, declaring herself amazed at his insolent presumption and accusing him of dishonourable, ungentlemanly conduct in thus entrapping a mere child into a disgraceful engagement with him. She would listen neither to explanations nor excuses, but, heedless alike of his protests and Jessie's tears, desired him to leave her at once, and forbade their ever speaking to each other again.

Alice could believe that no more unwelcome suitor could have presented himself. Had he been highly connected, though even poorer than he really was, Mrs. Carr might have chosen to romance about the poetry of poverty and the honour and glory of proving that gentle blood

could hold its own in the struggle for self-support and take a good place even in these levelling days. Had he been a lowly-born genius (well started on the way to win fortune and fame), she might quite as probably have held forth on the inestimable privilege of sharing the career and blessing the lot of a great soul. But unfortunately Mr. Sherwood was the personification of middle-class, commonplace insignificance. He had the manners and appearance of a gentlemanly, well-disposed, and rather good-looking boy of average sense and intelligence, but that was all; and his looks did him no injustice, beyond giving the impression of his being rather younger than he really was.

His family and connections were people of education and of refined habits of life, but they all belonged either to the trading or the professional world, and in neither

had any of them won noticeable wealth or position. Mr. Sherwood himself, though an only child and certain eventually of a very tolerable fortune (according to his own standard of such things), depended at present entirely on his assistant mastership at a large preparatory school of high reputation, and a small allowance from his father.

He was in fact an unexceptionable young clergyman to take charge of the parish during Mr. Carr's absence, but as a lover of Jessie's Alice could quite understand his being considered insufferable. She could not, indeed, give her own sympathy so exclusively to the rebellious side as she would have liked to do. Conscience compelled her to tell Mr. Sherwood that she had never intended to encourage his attachment to Jessie, and that she thought there was a good deal to be said for Mrs. Carr's


view of the matter, whatever might have been her faults of manner and temper in expressing it. Jessie was far too young to marry, too inexperienced to judge whether she could ever adapt herself to a life so different from anything she had been accustomed to, and too immature for any man to know what sort of wife she would make him.

Alice thought and said that it was a youthful folly on both sides which had better be forgotten ; but she blamed herself for having allowed it to happen, owned that she was extremely sorry for them, and asked with most cordial interest what he meant to do next. He replied that he had thought the best thing he could do was to go at once to Thornycroft and see Mr. George Randolph, whom he knew to be Jessie's guardian. He had accordingly ridden there that afternoon. He had

found Mrs. Carr there before him, and the matter already known to the Randolphs. He had seen them and had been treated with the utmost courtesy, but their opinion was virtually the same as Mrs. Carr's.

Jessie was much too young to be allowed to form *any* engagement at present, even if it were such as her friends thoroughly approved for her, which could scarcely be said of this. It must be entirely given up for the time; there must be no meetings, no communication of any sort, no pledge on either side. It must be understood that both were absolutely free; but on that condition it should also be understood that in the event of their both continuing in the same mind until Jessie was one-and-twenty (she was now just seventeen), no further opposition should be made by her family.

'But that is quite reasonable,' Alice said



decidedly, 'though you and Jessie may not think it so. She *is* a mere baby, you know!'

Mr. Sherwood, however, persisted in saying that to condemn them to four years of absolute separation was a barbarous exercise of tyranny.

'But if it were not absolute it would be useless,' answered Alice. 'And if either of you fail to stand the test, the wisdom of exacting it will be proved.'

This Mr. Sherwood indignantly denied.

'They may very likely succeed in persuading her to give me up,' he said, 'but I shall never admit that as a proof that she would not have been happy with me if we had been let alone.'

Alice could not help smiling. 'Anyhow you can do nothing but submit, I suppose,' she said, 'for you surely would not try to fetter her by any secret understanding, or

tempt her to any disobedience as to communication ?'

'Certainly not,' replied Mr. Sherwood. 'But Mr. Randolph is not her only guardian—and I—we—thought that perhaps her other uncle might be induced to take her part.'

Alice understood. They had counted on her influence over Colonel Myddleton being exercised in their favour. The consciousness of the power attributed to her was pleasant, but she answered with well-assumed indifference:

'Colonel Myddleton will most likely think as the Randolphs do about it; but even if he did not, I am sure he would consider that the decision ought to rest with them. I am very, very sorry for both you and Jessie, Mr. Sherwood, but I cannot give you the least hope of gaining anything by a further appeal.'

‘I am afraid you have been retained on the other side,’ said Mr. Sherwood, obviously disappointed.

‘No, indeed!’ exclaimed Alice. ‘My first and only information has come from yourself; and though I admit that it was thoughtless and stupid not to think of the probable consequence of your being so much together this summer, I never *did* think of it. If I had done so, I should certainly have tried to be more prudent and to save you both from all this trouble.’

‘And all the time we both felt so sure that you at any rate would be our friend!’

‘And so I am, I assure you,’ said Alice, ‘if you both really know your own minds; but nobody can feel satisfied of that with such a child as Jessie. If she does, you may be sure that all will come right in time, for no unfair pressure will be used by the Randolphins, and they will respect even an

attachment they would gladly have avoided, when once it has proved itself real and deeply rooted.'

This assurance seemed to give Mr. Sherwood some little comfort, but it only dealt with half the case.

'Her mother will not be so scrupulous,' he said. 'She will be a relentless enemy.'

'Possibly,' replied Alice. 'But luckily for the chances of Jessie's happiness (whether that depends on you or not) her mother has no power over her, now, except that of personal influence, which, of course, she is throwing away by her present unnecessary harshness.'

'And may I trust to *your* influence—which is great, I know—being used in my favour?' said Mr. Sherwood. 'You will encourage Jessie to remember me—and——'

At this moment the door was opened,

and Mrs. Carr was announced. It was an awkward interruption, as they all felt, and Alice, at once the coolest and most quick-sighted of the party, saw that a storm was impending, and was divided between indignation at Mrs. Carr's insolent manner, and curiosity as to what she would say or do in her present state of mind.

Mrs. Carr crossed the room towards Mrs. Brandon with an exaggeration of her usual leisurely grace, pointedly ignoring the existence of both Alice and Mr. Sherwood.

'I should not have come in, had I not expected to find you alone,' she said to Mrs. Brandon, in a tone for which Alice promptly resolved that she should be made to pay in some form or other, though not in Mr. Sherwood's presence.

He, fortunately, had tact and sense enough to go at once, and Alice turned to Mrs. Carr; but as her own presence had

been wilfully unrecognised, she saw no occasion on her side to go through any of the usual forms of greeting, and moving a chair towards her she said coolly, though not uncourteously :

‘ You had better sit down, for my mother must not stand any longer. Will you have any tea ?’

Mrs. Carr took the chair, bestowing on Alice as she did so a dignified gesture intended to convey to her at once conventional thanks for the attention, refusal of the tea, and the most crushing general displeasure. Alice merely left the tea-table without further remark, and seated herself on a low stool close to her mother's sofa, feeling half pugnacious and half amused, fully disposed to resent impertinence, and privately thinking that these tragedy-queen airs were very absurd, and that it was a great misfortune to a woman to be without

a sufficiently quick sense of the ridiculous where her own conduct and manners were concerned.

Mrs. Brandon was the first to speak, saying with her usual gentle sweetness :

‘I am sorry that all this trouble and annoyance should have come upon you immediately on your return home, Bertha, and especially to-day, when Laurence was away and you could not have his help. It must have been most trying for you—but I hope——’

She stopped suddenly, for Mrs. Carr, rising quickly, came close up to her and unceremoniously interrupted her.

‘I did not come here to listen to useless, tardy apologies and regrets for your utter neglect of the child I trusted to your care, but to tell you——’

Alice now started up, and interposed in her turn.

‘ You have no right to blame my mother for what has happened, for you knew perfectly well that she could not possibly look after Jessie, and——’

‘ Gently, Alice, gently,’ said Mrs. Brandon. ‘ I cannot be surprised at Bertha’s feeling that she has some ground for complaint against us.’

‘ She can have none against *you*,’ persisted Alice. ‘ If anyone is to blame, I am ; but it never occurred to me that this sort of thing would come of letting them be together, and I can only say that I am truly sorry for it. It is the last thing I wished or intended.’

‘ I am glad you admit that your conduct has been inexcusable——’ began Mrs. Carr.

‘ But I admit no such thing,’ cried Alice, hastily breaking into the middle of her sentence. ‘ And I absolutely deny that

you have any right to blame me, for you insisted on leaving Jessie here against my wishes, and notwithstanding my warning that this house was not the place for her at her age. She ought to have been at Thornycroft, as I plainly told you at the time.'

'I have taken her there now,' replied Mrs. Carr with mournful indignation, 'and she will remain entirely with her aunt. You have forced me to part with her indefinitely. I felt that no other course was open to me.'

Alice merely shrugged her shoulders, and was silent.

'But, my dear Bertha, surely that is unnecessary,' protested Mrs. Brandon. 'Mr. Sherwood goes away on Monday, not to return. After that why should you banish Jessie?'

'Because I will not expose her to the

contamination of the evil influences from which I could not keep her if she were here,' answered Mrs. Carr. 'I have come here on my way home from Thornycroft to desire that you will make Alice understand that I do not choose her to hold any communication whatever with my child from this time—and that I also insist on her having nothing to do with Grace and Marjory henceforward, except in my presence.'

'I think you can scarcely know what you are saying, Bertha,' remonstrated Mrs. Brandon gently. 'I am sure you will see your injustice when you are calmer, and have recovered from the shock of all this. Let us say no more about it, now.'

'I must say what I came to say,' was the haughty reply, 'for I wish that there should be no misconception ; but I see that I need not expect either comprehension or

sympathy from you, since you can speak of my "injustice" because I say that such a girl as Alice has shown herself to be is not a fit companion for either Jessie or the children.'

This roused Mrs. Brandon's indignation.

'I do not wish to quarrel, Bertha,' she said, 'but I cannot hear Alice spoken of in that way, and let it pass. She is young and inexperienced, and may have been imprudent, but I am sure no girl could have a kinder, truer friend than she has been to Jessie—while Grace and Marjory owe everything to her, as I think Laurence must have told you, for I know that he has fully appreciated her care of them.'

'Men are easily blinded,' was the reply. 'I know more already than he would ever have known by himself. Had I known it sooner, nothing would have induced me to leave Jessie here, you may be assured.'

‘That is not true,’ said Alice, bluntly. ‘You knew everything then that you know now.’

Mrs. Carr continued as if she had neither seen nor heard :

‘I can only hope that time and care may undo the mischief that has been done, though I am debarred from myself giving that care by the absolute necessity of keeping my child away from Earnscliffe.’

Mrs. Brandon was about to speak, but Alice forestalled her.

‘Don’t trouble to defend me, mother,’ she said. ‘You cannot suppose I mind such blame as this. Nor do you quite understand——’

‘I do not think she does,’ said Mrs. Carr, speaking with great deliberation. ‘A great deal goes on here that you know nothing of, Mary, I suspect, and I think it is only my duty to open your eyes. Making every

allowance for the totally different standard of conduct and habits to which, of course, I know you have been accustomed, and which may make you think lightly of faults of manner and taste at which I shudder—there are points on which I can scarcely conceive your not feeling for me and with me, if you knew the facts now known to me.'

Mrs. Brandon's colour went and came rapidly as she listened, but she maintained her self-control and did not speak.

Alice, however, burst out with intense indignation :

'Mother, how can you tolerate this? Let me stop it.'

'I am speaking to your mother—not to you,' said Mrs. Carr sharply; 'and I beg that you will not interfere. I ask you, Mary, what you would have felt in my place when you found that you had been deluded into leaving the innocent child,

whom you had carefully guarded from even the knowledge that such things were possible, to the intimate companionship of a boy so drunken and disreputable that he has to be sent from home under professional care, and of a girl who has made herself the talk of the neighbourhood by her midnight adventures with my brother, who has now by my advice left home for an indefinite time to escape the determined pursuit which it is so impossible for a gentleman to repel effectually in any other way.'

Mrs. Brandon was too utterly shocked and bewildered by this torrent of unwomanly insult to be able to speak, or to make any further attempt to restrain Alice, who sprang forward in a white heat of passion, and before Mrs. Carr had time to resist or remonstrate, drew her into the anteroom and closed the door after them.

‘This must end,’ she said, ‘and must never be repeated. We have hitherto carefully concealed my brother’s faults from my mother lest the sorrow and shame of the knowledge of them should kill her. I am sure you knew it, and your telling her in this way was wicked and cruel. For Uncle Laurence’s sake *she* will, I know, forgive what you have said to her, and will try to live in peace with you; but if my father were ever to know a tenth part of your insolence to her to-day he would never admit you into his house again, or allow any of us to speak to you. For myself I do not care what you choose to say or think of me—such baseless slander can hurt no one but yourself.’

Mrs. Carr had usually carried off the apparent victory when she had chosen to indulge in similar scenes, because she had

generally had to deal either with people who were afraid of her, or who would not condescend to answer her, or who bore with her for the sake of some one else; but Alice was not in the least afraid of her, and was far too angry for either dignified silence or wise forbearance, consequently she spoke with a vehemence and decision which fairly astonished Mrs. Carr into hearing her out, even while every sentence was making her frantic with rage and mortification.

‘Baseless slander, you say!’ she exclaimed, as Alice paused. ‘That remains to be proved. Dr. Franklyn’s special line is perfectly well known, I believe. And Roger told me himself last night that he should not return to Brianskirk for a long time, out of necessary consideration both for your feelings and your reputation.’

‘I must go to my mother,’ said Alice

with haughty contempt. 'This sort of thing is intolerable, and if we are to associate with you at all, we must insist on its never being repeated. Our standard of manners does differ from yours, I admit—very considerably; but we are not prepared to change it to suit you, I am afraid. Your carriage is waiting, I see.'

And without another word she walked back into the drawing-room they had just left, and closed and locked the door after her, leaving Mrs. Carr to usher herself out, and swallow her discomfiture as best she might.

'I have got rid of her, mother,' said Alice, as she entered the drawing-room and went up to Mrs. Brandon. 'But what a woman! Poor Uncle Laurence! I was sure from the first that she would turn out detestable in some way, but one might reasonably have expected her to behave

rather more like a lady—and to be a little less coarse in her choice of fibs.'

She spoke fast and lightly, hoping that it might be possible to ward off any serious discussion of what had passed; but Mrs. Brandon could not be so deceived, and insisted on knowing the whole truth about her son, even to the particulars of his final disgrace.

She was less overpowered at the moment than Alice had dreaded to see her, for it was but a sad confirmation of secret fears; but it was evident that she felt it too deeply to say much about it.

As they left the room to dress for dinner she touched on more delicate ground for a moment, saying:

'What I scarcely know how to forgive is her outrageous rudeness to you, Alice.'

Alice laughed scornfully.

‘She was just like a wasp in a rage, bent on stinging right and left; but one needn’t mind her. I don’t fancy she condescends to promiscuous gossip to outsiders, and the select few to whom she will abuse me will not believe her.’

‘Possibly not,’ replied Mrs. Brandon. ‘Still, malice always contrives to hurt more or less if it is unscrupulous enough, and I am sorry that you should be exposed to this sort of thing whenever you do or say anything that displeases her.’

‘Don’t worry yourself about me, mother!’ said Alice coolly. ‘I will undertake to hold my own against her.’

‘But, my dear child, think of your uncle. It would grieve me to have Laurence estranged from us by our quarrels with his wife.’

‘He will never really be that,’ said Alice. ‘Of course she will tell him her story

in her own way, but he will not *quite* believe her. He will only wonder, with the stupid injustice which men call being impartial, why women never *can* agree together, and will assume that we are all pretty equally to blame.'

Mrs. Brandon went early to her room that evening, thoroughly wretched and worn out; and Alice, as she always did when left alone, at once betook herself to her own abode in the tower, which looked cheerful and comfortable with a freshly lighted crackling wood fire. She did not, however, feel inclined to settle down to any employment; she had too much to think of. The luxury of undisturbed self-communing was an indulgence well earned by all the work and anxiety and emotion of the past week, and it was certainly needed to restore her mind and spirits to their usual balance; for though she professed and believed herself to feel the

utmost contempt for Mrs. Carr's insinuations she could not forget them, could not help longing to be assured that they had no foundation.

Glancing round the room before establishing herself in the low chair which she had drawn close to the hearth, her eyes fell on a parcel lying on her writing-table, and she went to see what it was. The address was in Colonel Myddleton's writing, and it evidently contained books—probably some which she had lent to him, and which he had returned before leaving home. She opened the parcel impatiently, for as there was no word of thanks on the outside she hoped that there might be a note for her within—as there was—one which had cost Colonel Myddleton much thought, and more than one rough copy before he could make up his mind to send it. As it now reached Alice it was as follows :

‘DEAR MISS BRANDON,

‘I return your books with many thanks and an apology for having kept them so long. I have read Madame d’Yffiniac’s essays with all the attention you made me promise to give them, and with great interest, but I cannot say that they have converted me to her way of thinking. I am afraid, however, that there is no chance of our arguing out the questions at present, as I am not likely to return to Brianskirk till next summer. I am going to take advantage of the freedom which I have never had before, and see something of Southern Europe this winter, and I think of having the boys to meet me somewhere for their Christmas holidays. I shall have news of you all now and then from the Randolphins and from Bertha, and shall hope to hear that you have good accounts of your brother. I shall very likely see Mr. Brandon

while I am in London next week. With kind regards to your mother.

‘ Believe me,

‘ Yours faithfully,


‘ ROGER MYDDLETON.

‘ Earncliffe Rectory, Friday night.’

Alice read and re-read this note in blank dismay, for short as it was, it fully sufficed for its purpose. Indefinite months of voluntary absence, for no object but mere amusement, and announced by such a note as this, could not possibly be misinterpreted under the circumstances. She saw with an agony of shame and indignation (what was indeed the literal truth) that every sentence had been carefully studied, and finally so worded as most effectually to put an end to the false ideas which he believed her to entertain as to his intentions with regard to her, while at the same time masking the

insulting caution under an assumption of a friendly intimacy, so conveniently tempered with indifference as to make this coolly courteous note natural and appropriate. She could more easily have forgiven him had he simply gone in silence—or at any rate she thought so now.

This note, at once so cruelly explicit and so affectedly reticent, seemed an unpardonable affront. With it in her hands she could almost believe that Mrs. Carr was not only right in fact as to her brother's intended absence, and its motive, but even correct in her repetition of his explanation of it to herself. It was no doubt treacherous of his sister to repeat what he had said for the purpose of gratifying her own insolence and spite, but Alice felt that it was base and cruel in him to have so spoken of her to anyone, even without suspecting that his words would be passed on to herself.



If Colonel Myddleton had left Earnscliffe on the evening after their drive from Atherley without attempting to see her, and had then gone away for an indefinite time, Alice would have suffered sharply; but she could have understood and excused his deciding to do so, and would not have felt that she had any right to resent his leaving her, however much she might regret it.

The case was very different now. He had deliberately sought her that evening to give her the welcome consolation of the fullest sympathy; and though his going with her afterwards to Clifton Grange might have been mere kindness, his manner during all the long hours they had spent in working together there had been such as to give her the strongest assurance of his love for her.

She recalled it all with the deepest morti-

fiction, for she feared that she had shown her own feeling towards him only too plainly. He must have seen it. He must have known, too, what would be thought and said about them by others, though it had not occurred to *her* to think of it ; yet he had voluntarily come to Clifton again twice, and each time had further deceived her by a tone and manner which gave a peculiar meaning even to the most ordinary words, and so increased her consciousness and self-betrayal. And now, after all this, he could go away, coolly intimating to herself that she had nothing more to expect from him, and insinuating to others that he was driven away by her pursuit of him !

Alice could see no excuse for his conduct towards her, for he was, as far as she knew, a perfectly free agent, responsible to no one, and with fortune and position enabling him

to please himself in his choice of a wife, unhampered by other considerations. She admitted to herself that he had never flirted with her in ordinary fashion, never indulged in personal flattery or superficial sentiment, never gone half so far towards 'making love' to her as she knew to be done often enough among her acquaintances without much serious feeling on either side; but he had steadily devoted himself to winning her confidence and respect and through them her affection, and having won it, he now threw it carelessly away.

It had been a summer's amusement to him to acquire almost absolute power over her, to watch her growing faith in himself and to test the strength of his influence by her readiness to yield her will to his and to be guided by his judgment and taste to the gradual overruling of her own. That was all. As soon as he had fully satisfied him-

self of his power the interest was gone, and he could leave her without hesitation—reckless alike of what she might feel and of what might be said of her. She had been duped into believing implicitly in his goodness and wisdom and unselfish, generous kindness—and had allowed him to see that she did so—and this was the end of it!

Alice had inherited far too much of her father's temper to bear what she felt to be an indignity without passionately resenting it. The sense of injury and insult roused all the hardest part of her nature. She heartily wished that she had never seen him, but she firmly resolved that, cost what it might, neither he nor anyone else should ever have it in their power to say that she had suffered under his desertion. No sign of regret or of flagging spirits should betray her. Though she felt that

all power of real enjoyment would fail her for long, the failure should not be perceptible even to those who knew her best and had the most constant opportunity of observing her.

The September morning had dawned before Alice left the tower to seek her bedroom, and it was impossible that in the course of all those long hours she should fail to remember that her acquaintance with Colonel Myddleton dated from their eventful walk to Corbie's Pool, when he had told her Alix Radclyffe's story, and she had seen the fatal 'Lady's Cross.' *This* 'daughter of Sir Brian's line' could not, like Cicely Radclyffe, meekly bow her head to the decree of fate, accepting neglect and disappointment as her destined lot on earth, and finding consolation in the endeavour to live for others as long as it was ordained that she should linger in this

world, while trusting with simple faith that she was but waiting for certain happiness hereafter.

Alice's spirit rebelled passionately against such tame submission. She felt that she could have been capable, like the heroine of Madame d'Yffiniac's two pictures, on which her eyes often rested as she impatiently paced the room, of voluntarily sacrificing love and personal happiness to the higher claims of duty, but 'Le choix de Margot' had not been offered to *her*. She had had no option as to the destruction of her dream of happiness, and even the duties to which she might naturally have turned for consolation were no longer open to her; she was effectually shut off from all her interests at the rectory by her uncle's marriage, and in her own home there was nothing for her to do.

It was a gloomy prospect that lay bef

Her—she might well believe herself to be under the spell of that Cross ; but she resolved proudly and vehemently that no such morbid superstition should drive her into acquiescence in dreary hopeless misery. She would not be cowed by such nonsense ; her life should not be spoiled nor her spirits crushed either by the heartless caprices of a living man and woman or by silly fancies about an old cross cut in a rock and with a traditionary curse attached to the sight of it ! She would prove to herself—and to others—that she was not at the mercy of circumstances, and that her happiness was in her own power alone.





CHAPTER VI.

ALICE'S nerves were in much too excited a state to allow of sleep, or even rest, being possible to her, and she very soon impatiently left her bed again, dressed and went off into the woods with her dogs. She was one of the people to whom active exercise in the open air is the best restorative of shaken self-control, and she was young enough and strong enough to bear a night's vigil without being visibly the worse for it, without indeed feeling it physically.

When she went to her mother's room

after a long ramble in the cool air of the autumn morning, followed by a fresh and careful toilet, she looked scarcely less bright and pretty than usual, and Mrs. Brandon was herself much too ill to notice minute changes in anyone else. Agitation and grief and anxiety had told upon her as severely as they almost invariably did, and after a sleepless night she was now so prostrate with acute nervous headache that there was nothing to be done but to leave her to the care of the devoted Turner, who had been her maid ever since her marriage, and whose wrath against Mrs. Carr, whom she guessed to be the cause of this attack, knew no bounds.

On going downstairs Alice found to her surprise that the breakfast-table was laid for two, and that Cuthbert Vaughan was waiting for her.

In reply to her exclamations he told her

that his holiday had just come to an end, that he was due at Scotsborough the next morning, and that as it was some time since he had heard anything of them all he had hurried his homeward journey a little so as to reach Baron's Bridge by the last train the previous evening, but when he got to Earnscliffe had thought it too late to disturb her by letting her know of his arrival.

Alice expressed all the pleasure she could at seeing him, but in fact his appearance was most unwelcome. There was no one whose observation she would not have preferred to encounter, for no one knew her so well or was so quick-sighted where she was concerned, and yet from no one was she more determined to conceal the truth as regarded herself at present. Of course she overacted her part. In telling him about the plans now being arranged for Dick ; in describing Bertie Chaloner's accident, its causes and

consequences; and still more in reporting Mrs. Carr's extraordinary outbreak of temper and insolence, she told it all graphically and amusingly enough, but with an exaggeration of her usual half-cynical vivacity which produced the effect of unfeeling flippancy. Her determination, too, to show that there was nothing whatever of which, for her own sake, she wished to shirk the fullest discussion, gave a want of reticence to her communications which Cuthbert disliked and regretted, even while painfully interested in all she said.

It jarred upon him that she should voluntarily make a joke of what Mrs. Carr had said, when he could not see that she need have repeated it at all. He was puzzled and concerned by this relapse into a tone which he had not heard from her for a long time; but he did not say much, and she rattled on as if afraid of a pause.

‘Of course I should not have told you all this about Jessie and Mr. Sherwood, whose love affairs are no concern of yours, if Mrs. Carr had not made such a fool of herself. As it is, you could not help finding out directly that things are all wrong among us. Mother is completely upset, and will most likely have to keep her room for days; and all intercourse with the rectory is virtually forbidden to me, since I may not see the children except in her presence, for I shall certainly keep out of *that* for some time! It is not that I care a straw what she either thinks or says of me, but one can't quite expose one's self voluntarily to being railed at in that way, you know!’

‘It must have been very disagreeable,’ said Cuthbert.

Alice laughed.

‘I am not so sure of that. Being in a

real rage is not altogether unpleasant for the moment; the excitement swamps annoyance and such-like mild sensations very completely! But on cool reflection the whole business is a horrid bore because of Uncle Laurence, poor dear man, who won't know what to do among us all. He is so fond of mother, and down in the real depths he will know quite well that *she* wasn't the least bit to blame, yet he will have to try to stand loyally by his wife. I suppose I, being really the only injured victim, shall be also made the scapegoat. It is the usual way of doubling the parts. Fortunately, it takes a good deal to quench me; and the whole thing is so silly that it would be ludicrous, if it were not for Uncle Laurence's share in it. Unluckily I do care a great deal about *him*, and I mind his being worried, although I must own that it serves him right for marrying that woman!

‘He may possibly be able to make her see that she was wrong and unreasonable in attacking you so hastily,’ suggested Cuthbert.

‘That would take plainer speaking than she will ever hear from *him*,’ replied Alice coolly. ‘Her brother might have brought her to her senses if he had been here; but he is not coming back till next summer—another grievance for which, you see, I am to bear the blame.’

‘That was only an invention at the moment, I suppose, to annoy you if possible?’

‘No,’ Alice said with perfect composure. ‘She told spiteful lies enough, but that is true as to the fact of his intending a long absence, though the motive was, of course, of her own coining. He told me himself yesterday, in a note about some books I had lent him, that he intended to spend

the winter abroad, and should not be at Brianskirk again till the summer.'

When Cuthbert had gone away a month ago for his short annual holiday, he had fully expected on his return to find that Alice was engaged to Colonel Myddleton; and with more candour and justice than might have been expected from him under the circumstances, he had admitted to himself that in all probability she had a happy future before her. He was thoroughly puzzled by her tone and manner now. Did her flighty bitterness and exaggerated assumption of indifference merely mean that she had had some quarrel with Colonel Myddleton, or was it that she had refused him and was already repenting having done so, and wishing to recall him, while afraid lest others should suspect the truth? Or was it possible that he had been so much disgusted with Dick's conduct and Mr.

Brandon's manners that his dislike to being connected with them had proved stronger than his affection for Alice, and that he had gone away in order to make this evident? Cuthbert scarcely knew what to say next, and before he could make up his mind he was relieved from the necessity of saying anything at all by the entrance of Mr. Carr, who came in alone and unannounced.

Alice's colour came and went quickly, but she forced herself to speak lightly.

'Surprises seem the order of the day,' she said. 'First Cuthbert turns up when nobody expected him, and now you appear at this unusual hour.'

'I came up early because I want to speak to your mother, Alice,' he replied. 'I have not much time to spare. Can I go to her, if she is not coming down?'

‘I am afraid not,’ answered Alice. ‘She has had a very bad night, and is still in too much pain either to listen or to speak. She ought to be as quiet as possible, I think ; but you can see Turner and ask her, if you like.’

‘No ; I will not disturb her if she is ill. We must talk things over together then, Alice, though I would rather have done it with your mother. It will never do for us to begin with a general misunderstanding.’

Cuthbert turned to leave the room as his brother-in-law spoke, but Alice laid her hand on his arm to detain him. The larger her audience the less difficult it would be to her to keep up the tone of contemptuous indifference which she had determined to adopt.

‘Don’t go, Cuthbert,’ she said. ‘We have no secrets to discuss, and we shall

be all the better for the presence of ~~an~~ an impartial third to keep us in order.'

Mr. Carr looked surprised, and rather ~~seer~~ displeased, but he said quietly :

'Stay, Cuthbert, by all means, if Alic~~ce~~ wishes it. I can have no objection to you~~r~~ being present.'

'Those words speak volumes, Unc~~le~~ Laurence,' cried Alice. 'They announc~~e~~ that you have heard one version of ~~a~~ll this nonsense, and have judged me on ~~the~~ strength of it. But before we can talk ~~it~~ over on fair terms you must hear ~~mine~~. First as to Jessie, poor child. As I ~~to~~ld Mrs. Carr at once, I am heartily sorry for what has happened ; but as I particularly begged not to have the charge of her, because I felt unfitted for it, I cannot blame myself in the matter ; and though she is still far too much of a baby to be allowed to plunge into love affairs, I do not see

that there would be any such very terrible evil in this one if they *should* happen to stick to it.'

'I agree with you there,' replied Mr. Barr, 'and I quite exonerate you from all blame as to Jessie, Alice. But I think you might have borne more patiently with a little unreasonable excitement about it on Bertha's part, seeing that the consequence of all this is to separate her indefinitely from the only one of her children left to her. It is no light matter for a mother to have to give up a girl of Jessie's age to the care of others.'

Alice laughed.

'But that is not because of Mr. Sherwood, as far as I could understand. It is to save her from the contamination of my society. Were you not told of my depravity? I was.'

'I had hoped to find you wiser and more

generous, Alice,' remonstrated Mr. Carr. 'Surely, even unreasonable words spoken at such a time should neither have been so sharply answered nor so bitterly remembered.'

Alice's manner softened a little.

'You know I hate vexing you, Uncle Laurence,' she said, 'but nothing would be gained now by our shirking the truth. I could and would have made every allowance for unreasonable reproaches to me on the score of Jessie's scrape, but not for the way in which the truth about Dick was forced on mother. As for the attack on myself, I ask for neither apology nor retraction, if you can secure that it shall not be repeated; but I cannot consent to apologise for having been insulted, and if that is the sole condition on which Mrs. Carr is prepared to withdraw her prohibition to my holding any intercourse with

either Jessie or the children, I can only say that I am sorry for it—keep away from the rectory—and hope to see *you* here sometimes.'

This might be quite reasonable, but it was scarcely conciliatory, and Mr. Carr looked hurt and puzzled.

'My knowledge of what passed is of course imperfect,' he began.

'That deficiency is easily remedied,' interposed Alice; and to Cuthbert's dismay she proceeded coolly to repeat exactly what had passed between her and Mrs. Carr, ending with, 'I have always believed Colonel Myddleton to be a sensible man and a gentleman, but he can be neither if he is capable of thinking, much less of saying, what I am told that he said. Such rubbish is not worth minding, however, when it has no foundation; and if you can only persuade Mrs. Carr not to allude to

it again, I am willing to go on now as if nothing had been said.'

There was a pause before Mr. Carr answered. Then he said gravely :

'I cannot blame you for making such a condition, Alice, though I trust you have misinterpreted Bertha's motives in speaking as she did. She naturally knows her brother better than we do; and though it might have been more judicious to give the warning at another time, such a hint from an older and more experienced friend is often a true kindness.'

Alice laughed.

'There was very little resemblance to either "hint" or "warning" in her words, I should say; and however well she may be supposed to know her brother, she can know nothing of *me* if she could fancy either necessary.'

Mr. Carr sighed, but he only said :

‘No good can come of discussing such a point. Let us have outward peace, at least. I think I can undertake that your conditions shall be observed, and in time I hope you and Bertha will come to understand each other better.’

Alice had affection enough for her uncle to refrain from making any reply to this, and he went away without speaking again.

‘I was a true prophet, you see, though you did snub me so decidedly at the time,’ said Alice, turning to Cuthbert who had listened in unbroken silence. ‘Take warning, Cuthbert; and when you marry, do try to have some little knowledge beforehand of your wife’s real character!’

‘I think I am safer than most men from the danger of marrying a woman I do not know,’ answered Cuthbert quietly.

‘Oh yes! You are wisdom personified,


of, and am not therefore likely to lose my head.'

As Cuthbert made no answer to this Alice allowed the subject to drop, and went away to prepare for church, leaving him thoroughly anxious and unhappy about her. He was quite convinced that she was meeting some great trouble in a spirit of hard defiance which could in the end only cause her to suffer longer and more sharply. He was too much in the dark to devise any way of helping her, and he was quite aware that to try to win her confidence would only be to shut her up in impenetrable reserve. Yet he very much feared that she was just in the mood to fall again under the influence of Madame d'Yffiniac and Mrs. Chaloner, and be induced by them to take a step to which she had hitherto refused to be persuaded, and

which he was sure would be fatal to her happiness.

That Sunday was a day of general constraint and discomfort at Earnsliffe. Alice went to church prepared to keep her promise of ignoring the previous afternoon's quarrel, and to meet Mrs. Carr with all necessary outward courtesy; but she had no opportunity of seeing how her magnanimity would be responded to, for Mrs. Carr did not appear at all. She had taken refuge in a plea of indisposition, and remained in her room all day, professing to be completely knocked up by all she had done and suffered the day before.

Her non-appearance was undoubtedly a relief for the moment, but after all it only postponed the awkwardness of meeting, and Alice thought she would have rather had it over. Mr. Carr looked anxious and harassed, while the two little girls evidently



had an uneasy consciousness that something was wrong among their elders, and seemed depressed and half-frightened.

Under ordinary circumstances on a fine afternoon, when there were no guests at the hall, there would have been a walk in common after the second service; but to-day all was changed. Mr. Carr was in a hurry to return to his wife; he was, as Alice indignantly saw, already learning what it meant to be a slave to the exactions of capricious and self-absorbed woman.

Cuthbert offered to take his little nieces for a ramble, but they could not go. Their father said that 'their mother had scarcely seen anything of them since her return home, and had invited them to have tea with her in her room as a great treat.'

There was nothing more to be said, and Grace and Marjory followed their father home with obvious reluctance, while Cuthbert and

and walked on to the hall together. He asked her if she would go for a walk with him, but she replied that she expected to find Madame d'Yfiniac waiting for her, and should probably be engaged with her all dinner-time. She did not say that she would prefer his assembling himself, but she seemed to think it probable that he would do so, and in the hour of the house they separated.

Madame d'Yfiniac had arrived, but Alice was in no mood to enjoy what at any other time would have been welcomed as a rare treat. Solitude was the one luxury for which she longed, freedom to be miserable without struggling to conceal that she was so; and she went wearily upstairs to the tower where she was told that Madame d'Yfiniac was waiting for her, feeling very unequal to the sort of conversation which was usually so delightful to her, but quite

determined to make any effort rather than allow herself to appear either depressed or preoccupied. She succeeded in her own opinion very well, quite unconscious that she really deceived no one but herself, and that Madame d'Yffiniac saw through her assumed gaiety and indifference quite as easily as Cuthbert had done, though she gave no sign that she did so, and talked for some time on a variety of subjects with all her usual brightness and fluency.

When towards the close of the visit plans came to be discussed, Alice scarcely knew whether she was glad or sorry to find that Madame d'Yffiniac had decided not to come to Earncliffe on this occasion, saying that she really must get home as quickly as possible, and had fixed to go on Wednesday. Alice of course protested and pleaded, first for an extension of time, and then that the remaining two days might be given to *her*,

but she was ashamed to find herself more relieved than disappointed when both requests were refused. Accumulated arrears of work which could not be longer neglected, except for some very urgent call elsewhere, fully justified a speedy return home, and Alice could not but acquiesce in its being reasonable that Madame d'Yffiniac should give her remaining time to the Chalons rather than to herself.

‘Yes, I am sure you will agree that I must not desert Juliet,’ said Madame d'Yffiniac, as Alice walked back towards Clifton Grange with her. ‘Bertie is doing as well as possible, and there is no need for further anxiety about him; but he still wants a great deal of care and attention, and I am particularly glad that my being here will give Juliet a little more freedom to enjoy her brother's short visit. I am staying on till Wednesday for that reason,

as well as to see something of Eliot myself.'

'I did not know that Mr. St. Aubyn was expected,' Alice said with some surprise.

'He was not,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac. 'No one had any idea that he was coming till he walked in this morning; but he had a day or two to spare rather unexpectedly, he was anxious to know how all was going on here, and as Mr. Chaloner had said in his telegram from Paris that I was coming home with Juliet, I flatter myself that he also had some wish to see *me*.'

'No doubt he had,' was Alice's answer, 'and it would be too bad if I were not to leave you here in peace now under the circumstances. But next time my claim must come first, remember. Do you only stay till Wednesday?'

'Only till Wednesday, and then Eliot will be my travelling companion to

London. But in the meantime we *have* plotted to see as much of you as possible, and have made charming schemes for to-morrow and Tuesday which only wait your approval; and as you have no guests at Earncliffe now, we count on your leisure as certain, for I know that when your mother is not well, absolute quiet is what she requires.'

'Yes,' replied Alice, 'that is true. But what have you been planning? I hardly see what could be found to do worth calling a scheme.'

She tried to speak brightly, but there was a want of her usual spirit which did not escape Madame d'Yffiniac's quick observation, as was shown by her answer.

'Speak out, Alice,' she said, laughing, 'and say that you wish us all at the bottom of the sea, so that you might be left quiet. It is quite excusable. You are

Worn out with all you have had to do this last week, my child, and it is telling on you now. But nothing will set you up again like fresh air and pleasant company, and you will be grateful afterwards for being stirred up now against your will.'

Alice turned on her rather sharply with a forced little laugh.

'You are fanciful, Barbe. I assure you I am perfectly well, not the least tired, and up to anything you can suggest.'

'So much the better,' said Madame d'Yffiniac. 'And here come the others to meet me, according to their promise, so we can all discuss our projects together, which will be more convenient than our doing it alone. And then Eliot can take you home.'

'Escorts are quite unnecessary here,' answered Alice quickly, 'and I particularly like walking alone.'

Next morning, leaving Madame d'Yffiniac free to spend it with Alice at Earnscliffe; but she professed to be very anxious to call at Thornycroft without loss of time to thank Lady Elizabeth for her great kindness, and proposed that if she and her brother could be conveniently mounted from the Earnscliffe stables, Alice should ride over with them in the afternoon.

There was no difficulty about horses, as Alice knew very well, and though for a moment she thought of declining to be of the party herself, she quickly rejected the idea and agreed to accompany them. Nothing should induce her to give the slightest opening for anyone to imagine that Colonel Myddleton's departure affected her in any possible way. He should not have a chance of hearing of her except as in the highest spirits and fullest occupation; and therefore, though she felt not only that

it would be almost intolerable to her to ~~g~~ go to Thornycroft at present, but also that ~~i~~ it would be in much better taste, after all the ~~at~~ that had passed about Jessie, to leave it to La-~~dy~~ Elizabeth to open communications with ~~h~~ her, she decided on going with Mrs. Chaloner and Mr. St. Aubyn rather than let them go alone and say that 'they could not stir her up to come with them,' which would probably be Mrs. Chaloner's way of putting it.

Monday being thus disposed of, a scheme for Tuesday was suggested which was almost too much for Alice's courage. Mrs. Chaloner had, it seemed, told Madame d'Yffiniac the story of Corbie's Pool; she was much interested, and was sure that she could use it most advantageously. And by way of helping her to do so, as well as of spending a pleasant day, Alice was begged to make use of her brother's drag and

take the party up to Brianskirk for the **day**.

‘I am sure the horses will be the better for a good day’s work, Alice,’ Mrs. Chaloner said, ‘and Fitzroy will drive. I shall stay at home with the children myself, but the rest of you really must go if it is fine, which it seems likely to be. If you don’t like to go to the house when no one is there, you can surely put up the horses at some inn or farm-house, and lionise Barbe at your leisure. It will be her last chance of seeing it if this railway goes on, you know; and as I have heard you say that there is a public footpath through the glen, you can have no scruple in going there.’

To this also Alice had consented without any apparent hesitation, and all she could do now was to make up her mind to get through the day as best she might. She

would gladly have persuaded even herself if she could, that it would be no great trial—but that was impossible. She knew that it would be horrible to her, but no one else should know it, cost her what it might to conceal it. And after all, there would be some satisfaction in helping Madame d'Yffiniac to treat that legend from her point of view, in direct opposition to Colonel Myddleton's clearly expressed wishes !

The more Cuthbert saw of Alice that evening, the more anxious he became about her. Strong affection enabled him to understand her wonderfully well, and he could have been told little more than he had gradually guessed as to her state of mind. He saw that excitement of some sort would be more essential to her than ever, and he dreaded leaving her to the influences now surrounding her. The only thing he could do to help her and protect her from herself with-

Out her knowing it, was, if possible, to suggest some new interest likely to prove absorbing for the time.

Alice had always recognised it as one of her first duties to do what she could to promote the physical and mental welfare of her father's people at Scotsborough, and of their families. She and Cuthbert had together planned and carried out many educational and other schemes, with all the more success because his prudence and good sense had prevented her from going too fast, trying too much at once, and from expecting more rapid success than was reasonable.

Cuthbert thought that during the coming winter Alice might attempt without much risk of failure to carry out her last new scheme, and set on foot at Scotsborough an institution for the benefit of the wives and daughters of the men in her father's em-

ployment, which was, of course, to be an improvement on the variety of similar experiments being made elsewhere. Amusement and instruction were to be skilfully and judiciously combined. There was to be a good reading-room and lending library, also occasional concerts and other entertainments; but the main object was to be to have regular classes and lectures of all kinds, especially for teaching the elements of such sciences as most directly affect domestic life.

Cuthbert had always intended to mature the practical parts of the scheme a little more in his own mind before discussing it further with Alice, but had not lately given much thought to it, from the belief that her own marriage would probably cool her interest in Scotsborough. He decided now to take up the plan again at once, and fortunately could do so easily, for he could say with truth that he had recently heard


that a building in every way suited for the purpose in the beginning could be had at a moderate rent. If the thing proved a success Mr. Brandon was sure to be willing to build for them in a year or two.

Alice entered into the subject readily enough, discussed all the details necessary to ensure the prosperous working of the scheme, planned rules and regulations, and promised liberal help as to money; but when Cuthbert suggested that for the first winter at any rate it would be desirable for her to be herself as much as possible the actual manager of it, and not merely a nominal head receiving reports at a distance and rarely appearing, she hesitated and said that it would require a good deal of consideration before she could undertake any personal responsibility of that kind.

Cuthbert agreed to this, but said that he could see no insuperable difficulties. After

the thing was once started and in working order she could easily rule it by deputy, but for the first few months her personal influence would be invaluable. The reasons he gave for thinking so were all perfectly true, though they were flattering to her, and Alice knew that he was also right in saying that she could do it if she chose.

Under present circumstances she was sure that on her mother's account her father would not object to her spending the winter chiefly at home, and in Dick's absence it would be natural enough that there should be less constant entertainments at Earnscliffe. If she were living quietly at home her father would raise no objection to her being as much at Scotsborough as she liked, for he knew that the sort of thing she did there was now as highly fashionable as any other amusement; but she herself saw two sides to the question.



She felt that excitement in some form was an absolute necessity to her now : she must either have real absorbing work, or constant amusement—and here was work offered to her in exact accordance with all her theories of what she wished it to be.

She would have eagerly accepted it, but the weakest part of her character stood in the way : her sensitive pride shrank from exposing herself to the comments always made when fast girls either become devotees or take to philanthropic work.

‘Some disappointment’ would be universally assumed to be the cause of the change, details would soon be guessed by a few, and then freely circulated among a tolerably large circle. Through Mrs. Carr Colonel Myddleton himself would hear of it, and would of course interpret it in the same way, might perhaps even think that she was trying to lure him back by ostentatiously

‘In that case I think the whole thing had better stand over for the present, as I doubt its success unless started with every advantage.’

Alice saw, however, that he was more disappointed than might have been expected, seeing that the plan was originally entirely hers and that his own judgment had always been rather against its being tried so soon, and with her usual quickness she guessed the truth. It was all a benevolent device to provide her with consolatory interest and occupation! She was up in arms in a moment in defence of her own dignity.

‘Oh, nonsense!’ she exclaimed. ‘If the thing would swim under me it will surely float without me, and that will do in the beginning. Now I think of it, too, I might help to start it in one way. We shall be having a number of people here before long, for the shooting, as usual, and

'It would not be a bad way of amusing
yourself to get up an amateur play (or an
opera if I could catch singing men enough),
and then give a performance at Scots-
borough. It would draw immensely, you
would see: and the profits would be worth
having, because I should make papa under-
take all the expenses.'

'It would do as well if you could per-
suade him to give what the expenses of
such a thing would come to,' replied Cath-
bert, with his practical good sense.

'For the women I dare say it might,'
replied Alice, 'but it would not be nearly
so amusing. No. We will kill two birds
with our stone: and then you must get on
without me, for I mean to go away for part
of the winter. Papa promised last year to
let me have a few weeks of good hunting
this winter, and I shall keep him to his
word and make a party with the Chaloners

for a month or two somewhere ; so you see I could be of no real use at Scotsborough.'

'Not easily, if you are hunting with the Chaloners,' answered Cuthbert, 'and if you have settled to do so there is no more to be said. The education of the Scotsborough women and girls must wait your leisure. The plan was your own, would be quite an extra thing, and would probably be a failure without you.'

Alice laughed.

'Well! Don't you think I *had* better go in for pleasure first, while I can enjoy it? Good works will be a resource afterwards, you know, when either health or spirits fail.'

'You ought to know better than I can what will suit you,' said Cuthbert. 'I must go by the first train to-morrow, so I shall not see you in the morning, and it is

too late to talk longer now. If you change your mind at any time you can let me know.'

He saw that in her present mood he could do no good, and had better not attempt it. She had never, he believed, stood so much in need of the influence of some wiser friend ; but as far as he could see there was no one to exercise it, and those by whom alone she would allow herself to be led would only lead her wrong.





CHAPTER VII.

‘**B**ARBE,’ said Mrs. Chaloner to Madame d’Yffiniac on Tuesday morning, as they watched the Earnscliffe drag coming along the road to call for the party at the Grange, ‘I wish I knew whether you were to be counted as friend or foe.’

Her glance at her brother, who was walking down the short drive to open the gate, sufficiently explained her meaning.

‘Do you think me likely to be a “foe” where Eliot’s happiness is concerned?’ was Madame d’Yffiniac’s reply.

‘You might differ as to the best way of securing it.’

‘I might—but in this case I do not. Alice will make him just the wife he ought to have.’

‘I am glad to hear you say so, for I wish it very much myself, for every reason ; and I was half afraid that you might not think him quite up to the mark for her, though I know you are very fond of him.’

‘He is not her equal in mind by any means. But this is a world of compromises, and his rank, sunny temper, and steady good sense very fairly balance her money, beauty, and talents ; though I own that I think he will on the whole be the greatest gainer.’

‘You speak as if you expected it to be.’

‘I fancied that it was a settled family arrangement, only waiting the ratification of the two principals.’

‘ So it is, in a way. I have talked about it with papa and Mr. Brandon, and they would both like it. Eliot knows this, and knows, too, that it would be just the thing for him. His wife *must* have money, and therefore it is uncommonly lucky that a girl whom he has been half in love with ever since he has known her should happen to have so much.’

‘ And Alice?’ said Madame d’Yffiniac.

‘ Oh! of course she knows—she is too quick not to see it all; but I have never spoken of it to her. I had fully hoped to get it settled this last spring in London, but Eliot was provoking and would not take any real pains to make her feel that he was in earnest; and then afterwards, down here, I was quite afraid that she was going to fall in love with that tiresome Colonel Myddleton, and that Eliot’s chance was lost.’

‘But now you think that she did not?’

‘It has evidently come to nothing, you see ; and putting together such crumbs of information as have reached me since I came home, I should guess that she has refused him, for he was certainly very much in love with her. We found no one at home at Thornycroft yesterday, or I might have gleaned something from Alice’s reception there. But I care very little how it was, as long as Roger Myddleton is safely out of the way ; for I have no great liking for him myself, and think he will be all the better for a little snubbing. I was enchanted to see Eliot and Alice getting on so well together yesterday, and with a little help from you I really think we might have it finally settled now. I was only afraid that you might wish to hinder rather than to help.’

Madame d’Yffiniac was silent for a

moments, apparently intent on collecting and packing up some of her sketching apparatus; but just as the drag came up to the door, she said rather abruptly :

‘The sooner it is settled the better, I think. The child will be safer and happier married.’

‘Then I may count on your helping it on, if you can?’ said Mrs. Chaloner.

‘Yes,’ was the reply. ‘I have come to the conclusion that it will be the best thing for her.’

The next moment they joined the others at the door, and a few minutes later Mrs. Chaloner saw the drag drive off on its way to Brianskirk.

‘That is all right,’ she said to herself, as she went upstairs to Bertie’s room. ‘She can turn them both round her little finger if she chooses; and if she means it to be, it will be.’

The drive up to Brianskirk was a long one. Madame d'Yffiniac had the seat on the box by Mr. Chaloner, who was driving, and who made very little demand on her attention in the way of conversation, so that while Alice and Eliot St. Aubyn chatted and laughed together just behind her, she had ample leisure to think over their affairs, and to make up her mind as to whether or not she would use the power which she fully believed herself to possess over both. She differed from Mrs. Chaloner as to the probable facts of the case, though she had chosen to keep her opinion to herself, and felt sure that whatever might be the reason for Colonel Myddleton's disappearance, it was not indifference on the part of Alice. Her only doubt, indeed, was as to the best way of managing matters now, and even as to that she did not hesitate much. There were pros and cons, no doubt, some rather

troublesome complications; but on the whole she considered that the advantages to Alice of an immediate engagement to Eliot St. Aubyn far outweighed the objections, and she resolved to use all her own influence (which she justly believed to be great) to bring it about without further delay.

Alice, meanwhile, thinking not at all of the future, and intent only on struggling through the present day without breaking down, devoted herself to her companion in a way which, considering the position in which they almost avowedly stood towards each other, was certainly so encouraging as to justify him in being both surprised and indignant if she were again to draw back as she had done once before. In truth she hardly knew what she was saying, for she dared not trust herself to think. To keep up a rattle of excited repartee was possible, while to have been quietly cheerful

would have been out of her power. To save herself from one difficulty she plunged recklessly into another, her strongest wish for the moment being to forget the past if she could.

They did not go to the house at Brianskirk. On that point Alice was firm. Passing the lodge, they drove on through the village to a farm just beyond it, where she knew that they could put up the horses, and near to which was the footpath that followed the Kirk Beck through the woods by Corbie's Force and Pool till it reached the Stayne. Alice, of course, had to do the honours of the glen, to point out the place where the broken bridge had blocked the stream, to show where the Cross and Cave would be found if the pretty, lively little river could be again suddenly drained dry, and to describe minutely all that she had seen on her own first visit to the spot.

They had luncheon by the pool, and naturally all this was the one subject of conversation. Alice was called on to repeat all the particulars of the old legend and of its more modern fulfilment in the story of Cicely Radclyffe; while as none of her companions had any reason for supposing that she had any personal interest in the matter, they made their comments, whether in jest or earnest, without restraint.

The whole thing was almost more than Alice could bear, and she often wished that she had not been too proud to spare herself such torture by finding some pretext for refusing to bring the party to the place at all.

As she had brought them, however, she was determined to go bravely through with it, and to show no vulnerable point. She answered every question that was asked; supplied Madame d'Yffiniac with the fullest

details in her power to give, 'because it was all such capital stock-in-trade for a novelist;' and finally gave an impromptu burlesque version of Cicely's story as adapted to the latter half of the nineteenth century, ridiculing the idea that any girl of the present day could possibly allow herself to be disturbed by a mediæval curse on Sir Brian Radclyffe's descendants, whatever a love-sick *dévoté* like Cicely Radclyffe might have done a hundred years ago.

It was the sort of thing she could do successfully enough, especially when, as now, she was over-excited, and as it were on the defensive against herself; for she had a lively imagination, an aptitude for putting things brightly, and a good deal of dramatic power. She saw that she amused her hearers, and for the moment she almost deceived herself into the belief that her mockery of all such 'romantic nonsense'

was genuine, and that she was really triumphantly defying superstition, while she had a vindictive pleasure in feeling how much every word she uttered would have annoyed and disgusted Colonel Myddleton. Could he only hear what she was saying, he would no longer be able to pique himself on having influenced her ways of thinking or speaking. The angry wish that this should somehow be made known to him prompted her to say suddenly to Eliot St. Aubyn :

‘ That wouldn’t make half a bad play ! I want to get up a performance of some sort at Scotsborough this autumn for a charity : if I work out the idea into a musical burlesque, as I am pretty sure I could if I tried, will you come to Earncliffe and help me to collect and drill a company for it ?’

Of course Mr. St. Aubyn would be

entirely at her service at any time and for any length of time.

‘Thanks,’ she replied. ‘Then we will discuss the question in all its bearings as we drive home. Now, I suppose, as luncheon seems to be over, we had better call the servants to take the baskets away, and set them free to refresh and amuse themselves up at the village while we proceed with our sight-seeing.’

Madame d’Yffiniac, however, announced that to go back to the farm would be as much walking as she should care to undertake, and that she should prefer to give all the time at her disposal to making one or two sketches of this picturesque glen. She expressed a hope that everyone else would follow their own inclination, and not think it necessary to stay with her; but somehow in a very few minutes all was settled exactly as she had intended that it should

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be, and she and Alice remained in the glen to sketch, while the two gentlemen went for a longish walk to see what progress the new railway was making, as it advanced slowly but surely across the moors to the destruction of all these relics of the past.

Eliot St. Aubyn had at first shown some inclination to stay with the ladies, but Madame d'Yffiniac sent him off with his brother-in-law, frankly declaring that as her visit was so short, she must have Alice to herself for a while, and that he could not complain, since he was allowed to monopolise her during the drive each way, which was decidedly having the lion's share of her society.

A word from Alice would have made him rebel against this mandate, but that word was not spoken. Something in the manner of all her companions suddenly reminded her that they assumed her to be

going further than she had yet quite made up her mind to go, and she shrank from finally committing herself.

For some time Madame d'Yffiniac and Alice discussed nothing more interesting than the gorgeous autumn colouring of the woods, the best point to choose for a sketch, and so on.

After a while, however, when both were fairly settled at work, Madame d'Yffiniac broke a silence by saying :

'I suppose there *are* people who genuinely admire such a character as Cicely Radclyffe's.'

Alice was too true not to say :

'I thought her journal very touching and interesting.'

'Almost all authentic personal revelations are more or less interesting,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac. 'The gossiping element in human nature is ineradicable.'

‘Do let us call it sympathy rather than gossip, Barbe,’ said Alice. ‘It sounds so much better.’

‘But *have* you any sympathy with Cicely?’

‘I could not help being very sorry for her.’

‘One must be sorry for all genuine suffering,’ was the reply, ‘just as one must respect a sense of duty in however ill-judged a form it may express itself. Cicely was, no doubt, a good woman as well as an unhappy one; but it is quite possible to do her justice and yet to object to having such sickly sentimentalism held up for admiration and imitation.’

Alice looked up with an instinctive protest, but she did not speak, and Madame d’Yffiniac went on:

‘The idea that every sorrow is to be looked upon not simply as part of the evil

in the world of which we must all bear our share until in our progress towards perfection we have rooted it out, but as a special divine message for the private benefit of each individual, is to me revolting as well as ludicrous. Cicely took that view of her small troubles, assumed that they were "sent" to teach her to alienate herself from this world as being a mere probationary prelude to another, and just waited with saint-like patience for that brilliant dreamland where "the wicked are to cease from troubling and the weary are to be at rest." It was all very sweet and graceful, though rather lazy and useless; and as she thought it the right thing, of course *for her* it was so; but in my opinion she was a warning, not a model.'

'Your creed differs so widely from hers that you could hardly see anything in the same light,' said Alice.

' True. I have, as you know, no sympathy with the common self-important belief in our individual and immortal personality. Why should we each wish to have our own distinct little existence perpetuated? To me there is something much grander in the thought of being an inseparable, even if infinitesimal, part of a really great and glorious whole, such as I conceive the human race to be; and I do not see that it would be possible to imagine a more sublime perfection of justice than that our respective shares in the undying future of Humanity should thus of necessity depend on what we have contributed to its development. To my mind no theory could better bear being thoroughly worked out, or lead to a higher and purer faith; but of course it reduces personal joys and sorrows to their proper level, and deprives them of all special significance.'

Alice had often before heard Madame d'Yffiniac expound her views on these subjects, and had always listened with an eager interest, half-dissentient, half-appreciative; but to-day she was silent—she could neither argue nor echo.

After a short pause Madame d'Yffiniac returned to more personal questions.

'If I ever do find a novel on all this,' she said, 'and the story is certainly full of picturesque capabilities, I shall keep my heroine clear of Cicely's superstitious sentiment. She shall behave as you or I would think it right to do in similar circumstances—as indeed I once did.'

'But you can never have been in the same position!' exclaimed Alice, roused to interest by this.

'Not precisely, of course. I had nothing to do with ancestral legends or curses; but years ago, when I was a girl, I found that I

had made very much the same false start that Cicely did, and that the path I had set my heart on following proved to be a *cul-de-sac*. But instead of acquiescing in the check as a heaven-sent warning to think no more of this world, I decided not to allow a mistake and its consequences to paralyse me through life. I took my fate into my own hands and started boldly on a fresh track—with what result you know. But,' she added, with a sudden change of tone and manner, 'don't let us talk about such stupid things as me and my past, when your future is so much more interesting to us both at the present moment.'

'My future!' was all Alice could say.

'Yes. I can't be conventional and ignore it all, when I shall not see you again for so long. Even if it is a little indiscreet, let me have the pleasure of telling you how

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My dear Mother

I have just received your kind letter of the 10th and was glad to hear from you.

I am well and hope these few lines will find you the same. I have not much news to write at present.

I am sure you will be glad to hear that I am still in the land of the living.

When I am alone I like to say that even I have to wait to give your kind regards and that is very true: but my excuse must be my greater interest in your health. I have seen for a long time what Eliza wanted, and I have shown and shared the hopes and wishes of both your families: but you yourself were insensible. I thought during the summer that I saw signs in your letters that you were not quite so "fancy free" as you used to be, but I could not tell what

the cause of the change might be ; and then I found that Juliet was afraid of some rival, and I was sorry, for I think the best fate for both of you will be to marry each other. Your influence will be just the stimulus he needs to make him do himself justice, while as his wife you will have exactly the position to suit you and give the fullest scope to all your powers of usefulness. Ever since I came here now, I have been rejoicing so much to think that you had at last decided in his favour, that I could not resist the temptation to tell you so, though I own that it was rather an unwarrantable liberty to mention the subject till you gave me leave.'

'Scarcely that,' Alice replied. 'You know that you may always say whatever you please to me. But, really, you are premature.'

'By how many hours, I wonder?' said

side, she added gravely, ' Few people know you as well as I do, Alice, and I *think* I see your puzzle—no, do not answer me. I am not asking for a confidence which is better withheld—I am only trying to give you strength and courage, for I shall be grievously disappointed if you fail to act wisely and bravely now. Don't forget that we have each a very tiny scrap of time in which to make our mark on life, and a limited number of chances of doing it to the best advantage; and think well before you reject such an opportunity as this for fully using every gift at your command—and having at the same time so happy a home and so brilliant a position that no one but myself will ever give you credit for having accepted it with hesitation as a duty! Of course, it will be universally believed that you have joyfully pounced upon it as the fullest realisation of your

ideal. Eliot has every requisite for the part of a *jeune premier*.'

'One is wanting,' said Alice abruptly.

'He does not really love me.'

'Indeed he does, and very truly too, though he only shows it in his own easy-going modern fashion,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac. 'Don't be too exacting, Alice. You like and respect each other thoroughly, and will do so more and more the longer you live happily together; but—for different reasons—there will be no attempt at a *grande passion* on either side. It is not in him to go in for that sort of thing, which, under the circumstances, is fortunate, I should say, as it puts you on equal terms, and saves you from all scruples of conscience as to not reciprocating it.'

Alice turned away without answering, as if rather hurt by the tone of this speech; but Madame d'Yffiniac caught her hand to

detain her, and said, with an almost passionate earnestness, which was a startling change :

‘ Don’t think me hard and cold, my child. Believe me when I say that I understand it all, and feel for you more than it would be good for either of us that I should try to tell you. Like most of us, you have had your dream, Alice, and have waked and know that it was a dream. Blot it out at once, then. Personal sorrows are clogs to be thrown off—not precious burdens to be hugged. Like every other incident in life, they teach their lesson if you take them rightly ; but to make the memory of a folly the key-note of your life is a grievous mistake, and one from which I would save you if I can, even at the risk of offending you by my plain speaking.’

Alice listened in silence, and then walked slowly away down the path by the side of

the little river. Madame d'Yffiniac looked after her compassionately and gave a deep sigh.

‘Poor child!’ she said half-aloud to herself. ‘It seems cruel to force this on her so soon—but it is the best cure for her. I am glad that I am here, for I doubt if anyone else could have induced her to take the step—indeed I dare say half her friends, if they knew the circumstances, would try to dissuade her from it. Luckily my influence over her is stronger than any other; when she comes back to me now she will have wound herself up to follow my advice, and she will thank me for it in the end.’

For a few moments after this she sat apparently watching Alice as she disappeared among the trees, but really seeing nothing but visions of her own past. At last she suddenly roused herself, and with an impatient gesture and a muttered, ‘I did

not think I should ever again be such a fool as to go back to that old story,' she resumed her drawing with an air of determination implying that work *should* conquer dreams.

Madame d'Yffiniac's influence over Alice was undoubtedly great, and it had been skilfully used. By the time Alice had reached the seat at the craggy point on the top of the cliff where Colonel Myddleton had taken her on her first evening at Brianskirk, and where he had suggested the further walk to Corbie's Pool, she had almost persuaded herself that the right thing for her to do was to marry Eliot St. Aubyn. She sat there absorbed in thought, and (for her) strangely indifferent to the beauty of the view before her eyes. She looked at it indeed almost without seeing it, though she was conscious of a sense of relief from the absolute solitude in that fresh, pure air, with no sound to disturb

her but the murmur of the river in its gentle monotonous summer voice far below her, and the faint rustling of an occasional breeze among the trees.

Madame d'Yffiniac's arguments appeared to Alice much more forcible than they would have done had she not wished so much to be convinced by them. She longed to feel justified in taking a step which would promptly refute the report, sure to be set on foot, that she was wearing the willow for Colonel Myddleton, while she was scarcely less anxious to grasp at a prospect which seemed the most likely to enable her to defy all haunting recollections of the Lady's Cross and Cave and Curse. She foresaw no difficulty in making Eliot St. Aubyn as good a wife as he had any right to expect. She could give him all that he wanted—her money in the first place—and in the second, as much of herself as he would understand

or care for. She knew that she could easily take and keep the place in society which he would desire that his wife should hold, and she felt sure of being able to get on well with him in daily life.

He was sensible, good-tempered and well-bred, and on the surface they had so much in common that it would be easy to give him the cordial sympathetic companionship with which he would be quite content. If his wife satisfied his taste, was loyal to his interests, and cheerfully shared his amusements, he would ask no more—would indeed be rather bored than not by more being either given to him or demanded from him.

On this point Alice attempted no self-deception. She was quite sure that he would not have sought her for her money had he not also liked and admired her, but she was quite aware that he would most

certainly never have thought of marrying her without it.

Under these circumstances Alice told herself that she need not feel bound in honour to make any humiliating confessions. Her 'folly,' as she chose to call it, though so recent, was too completely past to affect her in the future. She could trust herself to marry Eliot St. Aubyn without any fear of failing to make him happy according to his notions of happiness, while her own best chance of content *must* lie in undertaking a life which at her pleasure she could so fill to overflowing with duties and amusements that she might hope to forget what had preceded it. And then, though she must perhaps decide at once, which would indeed be a relief in her present state of mind, she might easily delay the marriage for a considerable time. She argued thus to herself and tried hard to believe that she was con-

vinced; but all the time there was an undercurrent of truer feeling, holding her back, warning her that she was on dangerous ground and was following a false light.





CHAPTER VIII.

ALICE'S meditations were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a handsome black retriever, who trotted briskly round the corner of the crag, and instantly changing his air of suspicious inquiry for one of joyful recognition, put two great paws on her knee and tried to lick her face.

It was Colonel Myddleton's own especial dog and constant companion ; and Alice, who was naturally fond of animals, had always been kind to him, both for his own sake and his master's.

‘ Poor Nero !’ she said now, as she patted him. ‘ So he has left you too—I wonder which of us misses him the most ? But we don’t quite agree, old dog ; for when he comes back—let it be when it may—you will bear no malice, but just go wild with joy, and trot after him all day long as you used to do ; while *I*—the one thing I could *not* bear would be to see him again——’

The thought of such a meeting, under any conceivable circumstances, shook her composure more than anything else had yet done ; and throwing her arms round Nero’s neck, she leaned her head wearily against him, too much absorbed in her own wretchedness to notice an approaching step, and was first roused by hearing her name spoken by Colonel Myddleton in a tone of extreme surprise.

Nero dashed back impetuously to his master’s side, while Alice started to

her feet with a horrible consciousness of having betrayed her misery to the person of all others from whom she would have most desired to conceal it. She was, nevertheless, the first of the two to recover herself, and broke the awkward silence which followed their recognition of each other's unexpected presence by saying with a very fair assumption of ease :

‘ I ought to apologise for being found trespassing here, but I had no idea that you were at home when I drove up to the village this morning to show this part of the river to some friends. Mr. Chaloner and Mr. St. Aubyn have gone off now to look at the railway works on the moor, and Madame d'Yffiniac is sketching the fall down there ; but I found the glen so stuffy that I wandered up here for fresh air, persuaded that I had the best authority for believing Brianskirk to be deserted.’

‘I went away, as you know, on Friday, with no intention of returning,’ replied Colonel Myddleton; ‘but the letters I received in London yesterday decided me to come back at once, though I shall leave again as soon as possible.’

‘Ah! poor little Jessie!’ said Alice. ‘Have you come to swell the ranks of her tormentors? She had hoped to have you for an ally, I can assure you.’

‘I shall not meddle at all. It is best left to the Randolphs. My only object in coming down was to see *you*—once more.’

If the beginning of this last sentence startled Alice, the final words, following a moment’s hesitation, and the tone in which they were spoken, puzzled her even more. She raised her eyes for the first time to meet his, and one moment sufficed wholly to change the current of her feeling towards

him, for in the grave, sad look bent on her there was none of the callous indifference with which she had credited him. She knew at once, beyond all possibility of doubt, that she had entirely misjudged him, and that whatever stood between her and the happiness she had dreamed of was something beyond his control, and not any want of love for her. They were to part—that was clear to her—but the parting was inevitable, and was no less painful to him than to herself.

The strength and courage which her defiant determination to show no weakness had given her at first, failed under this sudden revulsion of feeling. She sat down because she felt that she was trembling too much to stand, and she was silent because to speak would have been impossible.

Colonel Myddleton stood beside her, leaning against the wall of rock ; but, for a few

seconds, he too was silent, while Nero, unable to understand such a complete collapse of animation, and such oblivion of his existence, stood wagging his tail, and looking from one to the other with wistful eyes.

‘You had my note?’ said Colonel Myddleton at last.

‘Yes,’ was all her answer.

‘When I wrote it,’ he went on quickly, ‘I had persuaded myself that the only thing to be done was to go away with as little fuss as might be ; but afterwards, when I was alone in London and could consider it all more coolly, I thought differently, and I made up my mind to write to you the full explanation to which I felt that our friendship entitled you. Yesterday morning’s post, however, brought me not only letters from Thornycroft with Jessie’s story, but also one from Bertha, which decided me to come

down instead of writing. Knowing, as I do, her incredible power of malicious misrepresentation, I was determined to see you myself, and ensure your knowing truth from falsehood. I arrived here half an hour ago, and intended to go down to Earncliffe to-morrow morning early enough to be certain of finding you at home ; but as we have met here I need not trouble you again if you will give me a few minutes of your time now, and let me tell you a story which will at any rate enable you to judge me justly, whatever you may hear from others.'

Alice's imagination was very busy even while she listened with breathless interest to what Colonel Myddleton said, and by the time he paused she had in fancy almost wholly forestalled the explanation promised to her. She saw that there was some in-superable barrier between them, and hastily

jumped to the conclusion that it could only be an early and unfortunate marriage, such as she had often read of in novels and had occasionally known of among other romances of real life.

It was easy to imagine a story of some youthful imprudence in which he had been more sinned against than sinning, and to suppose that he had only lately discovered that he was still fettered by the consequences. He was at once restored to his former place in her estimation, and she felt that, whatever might be the details of the story she was to hear, she could never again doubt or misjudge him. She was sure that his affection for herself was as strong and true as she had believed it to be, she was certain that he had neither intentionally trifled with her nor spoken lightly of her, and from that moment her resolution was taken. She would be as loyally true to him,

even in hopeless separation, as if she were his wife—content in the firm conviction of his love for her fully to share every penalty that he must still pay for former follies. If *his* life must be lonely, *hers* should be so too: henceforward no scheme of separate happiness for herself could be anything but repulsive to her. The proud and passionate resentment which had ruled her unchecked for the last three days, and the temptation to which she had so nearly yielded, had both lost their power, and appeared to her now like a bad dream, in which she had hung over the brink of a precipice, and from which she had waked to safety if not to happiness.

These thoughts, rushing in quick, bewildering succession through Alice's mind, absorbed her during the first few moments after Colonel Myddleton ceased to speak; but she soon felt the silence oppressive and

intolerable, and looking up as if to ask him to go on, saw at once, with the sympathetic intuition which never failed her, at what a cost to himself the promised confidence would be given. Then, as usual, she followed the impulse of the moment without hesitation, and exclaimed impetuously:

‘Don’t tell me any more! I am glad that you have come back and just said—this—because I *have* been misjudging you—I could not help it. But there is no fear now of my doing so again, whatever Mrs. Carr or anyone else may say. You may trust me always to believe that you have good reasons for what you do, even though you spare yourself all further explanation.’

Colonel Myddleton smiled, though the smile had no mirth in it.

‘That is generous and like yourself,’ he said; ‘but I wish you to know the whole

truth. I will leave nothing for you to learn piecemeal from Bertha, distorted just as her caprice may suggest to her. What she may have told you already of course I do not know——’

‘Absolutely nothing—as to facts,’ interrupted Alice.

‘Exactly,’ he replied. ‘I suppose she only gave you a selection from the few sentences that passed between us about my leaving Brianskirk, deliberately withholding all that would have explained them. Well, so much the better, perhaps, if you will have patience while I tell you my own story, beginning as long ago as the summer of 1864.’

‘Twelve years ago!’ cried Alice, startled at being thus suddenly taken back to her nursery days.

‘Yes. Twelve years go, when you were a mere child and I was still quite a young

man, I was with a friend on a walking tour in the Bavarian Highlands when he was telegraphed for to Vienna where his father had been taken ill. I agreed to wait for him in the village where we happened to be, for he only expected to be detained for a day or two. At the end of a month he had to help his mother and sisters to take his father home, while I still lingered where he had left me. No country could be more delightful for walking, fishing or sketching—and what more could I want except pleasant company, which also I had, as it seemed to me, in perfection. It was an out-of-the-way village unknown to tourists; but one artist was settled there for the summer with his daughter, and all my time was spent with them. Their name was Robarts, and they called themselves English; but they seemed to be quite as much if not more at home in every other

country in Europe, and to have led a wandering life, associating everywhere chiefly with artists and musicians and people of that sort. In fact they were thorough "Bohemians." As you know, I dislike both that hackneyed word and the thing it now professes to mean, but no other describes them so well.'

'You did not dislike it so much then, I suppose?' said Alice, with a touch of bitterness in her tone.

'I knew practically nothing about it,' he replied, 'for I had lived entirely among my own connections, or with my regiment; but I found these people very pleasant. They never spoke of any relations, and seemed to have no roots anywhere, and beyond the fact that the mother had died when Marion was only three years old, I never, either then or afterwards, learned anything of their antecedents; but though

they were both unconventional in the extreme there was not a trace of vulgarity about them. We spent five weeks together in the easy intimacy inevitable under such circumstances if people fraternise at all; and then I returned to England, for my leave was over, while they went to Italy for the winter. At first I exchanged a letter or two with them, but I always hated writing, so it soon dropped, and I heard nothing of them for months.'

'And yet you loved her?' Alice could not help exclaiming.

'I think that is proof that I did not,' was the reply. 'And though while I was with her I had believed that I did, and that had I only been in a position to marry without imprudence I should certainly have married her, it never occurred to me to sacrifice prudence for her sake, while very soon after I left them I ceased to think

much about her. In the following spring I received a note from her father, who had the address from which letters were always sure to be forwarded to me. They were in London, and as soon as I could I went to see them. They were in small lodgings in a street near the Temple. Robarts was ill—dying—and they seemed to be very poor. I saw a good deal of them, for I appeared to be their only friend, and I could easily run up from Aldershot for a few hours pretty often. Marion had a heavy burden to bear, and there was no one but myself to whom she could turn for help or comfort; but she seemed willing to let me do what I could for her—and so it drifted on to the end which I suppose any looker-on would have foreseen from the beginning to be inevitable.'

He paused, but Alice did not speak. It was intolerable to her to think that the

same perfection of unselfish sympathy which had so lately been everything to herself, should once have been wasted on this girl, who had somehow spoiled his life, and who now stood in the way of *her* happiness.

‘I soon found,’ continued Colonel Myddleton, ‘that Robarts was wretched at the idea of leaving Marion alone and penniless, for he had recently lost the whole of the small fortune they possessed in some ill-judged speculation, and they had barely the means left to pay their way for a few weeks longer. They had no relations, he said, no friends at all in England, and none anywhere to whose care he could leave her.’

‘So they had hunted you down—to lay their burden on you,’ said Alice.

‘The father, no doubt, had thought of that as his last hope for Marion, and even

now I cannot blame him, for she had refused a good offer of marriage during the past winter, and he insinuated, or my vanity made me so understand him, his belief that she had done so because of her preference for me.'

'He ought not to have told you that, even if it was true,' cried Alice.

'Perhaps not; but remember that he was dying, and that his one anxiety was to secure a safe and happy home for her. I was in a difficulty. I was too poor for it to be desirable that I should marry so young, but I had a sufficient independence to make it *possible*. I admired Marion extremely, but I was not so much in love as not to feel the full force of every objection to such a marriage; yet my conscience told me that I had been imprudent, and that she might not unreasonably think that I loved her, while I was vain enough to believe that she

loved me. It seemed base to desert her, and I did not see how I could effectually help her except by marrying her, for I knew that she would not take money from me on any pretence unless she were my wife, and her education had been too irregular to admit of her becoming a governess. At last I asked her to marry me, and resolved that she should never know that I had hesitated about it. I was responsible to no one, and had no consent to ask; but I wrote at once to Bertha (I did not know her then as I do now) and told her and Harold the story, asking them to be kind to Marion, and to invite her to make Brianskirk her home after her father's death (which could not be long delayed) until our marriage could take place.'

'And they refused?'

'No. But the day after I had written this letter I went up to London and found

Robarts much worse—very weak and in a highly excited nervous state. He entreated me to let him die in peace knowing that he left Marion my wife. I could not refuse, and she was easily persuaded to consent. I hastily made the necessary arrangements, and we were married early the next morning in the parish church of the district where they were living. Robarts had rallied wonderfully for the moment, and was able by a great effort of will to be present. I was obliged to leave them instantly, for I had to be at Aldershot by twelve o'clock ; but I supplied Marion with money, which she had never before allowed me to do, and I promised to return to them as soon as it was possible. I never saw either of them again.'

Colonel Myddleton was the last man in the world to say or do anything with a view to theatrical effect, and merely made

this startling statement so abruptly because it was easier to him to plunge straight into the middle of the disagreeable part of the story he had to tell than to lead up to it gradually.

Alice was taken completely by surprise.

‘Do you mean that they were mere common swindlers, who only wanted to trick you out of money?’ she asked hurriedly.

‘No. Even then I was not such a fool as I must have been in that case,’ he replied. ‘And she was genuine enough, poor girl, or such a sudden and complete disappearance would not have been her game.’

‘Then what happened?’

‘You shall know all that I do,’ was his answer. ‘I was so busy, for we were preparing for a great review, that for a day

or two I did not wonder at not hearing from her. When, however, a fourth day brought me no letter from her I was surprised, and I wrote to her to ask how they were getting on, to tell her what I was doing, and to enclose a very kind note which I had had from Harold Leigh, making the best of things, as he always did, and saying that Bertha had written to Miss Robarts, who should be made welcome at Brianskirk as soon as she should need a home. I allowed ample time for an answer, but none came. Then I telegraphed. That produced no answer either, and then I became really anxious, fearing that Marion herself must be ill. At last, rather more than a week after our marriage, I received a thick packet from her containing a few lines from herself and several enclosures—among them the letter from Harold which I had sent to her,

Bertha's letter to herself, and my letter to Bertha, which she had sent to Marion, and which had betrayed to her all that I should most carefully have concealed from her as to the motives which had finally conquered my reluctance to hamper myself with a wife. When I wrote it I had not been conscious that I was allowing the truth to be visible; but when I read it again I saw that it was too plain to be mistaken, and Bertha had taken care that its meaning should not be lost on Marion.'

'How like her!' Alice exclaimed.

'You are right; but she wrote with such ostensible kindness that Harold never saw in it anything but a well-meant error of judgment, though it opened my eyes once for all, and I have never trusted her since. She disliked my making such a marriage, and if only she could prevent it was quite unscrupulous as to the means she used

to do so. She complied with Harold's wish that she should give Marion a cordial invitation to Brianskirk, and she expressed in very flattering terms her own readiness to welcome her as a sister ; but then she went on to say that she should feel it to be the basest treachery if she were to allow another woman, in whose delicacy and good feeling she had every reason to believe, to marry in ignorance of the sacrifice she was allowing to be made for her. Therefore—"in the strictest confidence," and "only in fulfilment of a sacred duty"—she enclosed my letter to herself, pointing the meaning of every sentence by her own comments, which I need not repeat.'

'I can imagine them !' said Alice. 'But even I should hardly have thought that she would have ventured on such treachery to *you*, however unscrupulous she might be as to Miss Robarts.'

‘She maintained afterwards that what she had done required no apology—she had merely told Marion what in her place she should certainly have desired should be told to herself—what it was only right and just that she should know—and that it was no fault of hers that the knowledge came too late.’

‘That was all true,’ said Alice, ‘but she had no right to use your letter without your leave.’

‘Of course she had not—nor do I think she had any business to meddle at all; certainly her profession of having done so from a sense of duty, and from extreme consideration for Marion, was humbug. She wanted to stop the thing, and she trusted that Marion’s pride would make her break off the engagement without giving me the true reason, as most likely she would have done had she got the letter before instead of

after our marriage. Coming when it did, it drove her to take a desperate step. Her father was taken ill again, as I learned from her own note to me, a few hours after I left them, and died in the night. The morning's post brought her Bertha's letter. Even now it is horrible to me to think of the shock it must have been to her at such a moment; and had I been with her, or had she written at once, I could have understood and forgiven any degree of unreasonable vehemence of indignation at having been to a certain extent deceived—and proud and passionate and self-willed though she was, I think then all would have come right between us—but nothing could justify the line she took. She waited to write until the day after her father's funeral, and told me that she had done so in order to give herself time to arrange her plans so that I should see no more of her.


She was grateful, she said, for my intention of sacrificing myself for her sake, but she would never consciously be an unwelcome burden to any man. Unfortunately it was not in her power to free me completely; but short of enabling me to marry anyone else, she could and would release me from every tie. She had realised money enough by the sale of a few valuable ornaments to pay everything owing either on her father's account or her own, and in case of any future claims being made, she enclosed all the receipts to me, as well as the cheque which I had given her on that last morning.'

Alice uttered an exclamation at this, but did not speak, and Colonel Myddleton went on :

'She said that she had no need of it, as she had money enough left without it to take her out of England to friends who

would give her a home until she could find work by which to support herself. I need feel no anxiety about her future, she assured me, as she could perfectly well take care of herself; and I need have no fear of her disgracing my name, for she should never take it. She would take means to ensure my being informed of her death whenever it should happen, but in the meantime I should find all attempts to trace her useless. There was not a word of complaint or reproach in the letter—but neither was there any sign of feeling—from beginning to end: it was as cold and hard as if the whole affair had been a mere commonplace matter of business.

‘She dared not show any feeling lest she should break down and show too much!’ cried Alice. ‘You blame her, and I know that she would generally be considered wrong—was wrong indeed—but I feel that



in her place I should have done as she did, and I can only pity her.'

'You would not have done as she did,' was the instant reply. 'Your first impulse might have been the same, and you might even have tried to carry it out; but you would soon have felt that you were unjust, and then *you* would not have lost a moment in owning it. I had made a mistake, no doubt; but surely it was not for *her* to punish it as she did. What had I done to deserve such an insult as that letter?'

Alice sympathised so fully with both that she could only be silent. Such a return for his unselfish kindness must have seemed like cold-hearted ingratitude; and yet Alice, with her own proud and passionate nature, could understand and excuse Marion's impulse of flight under the influence of such a disappointment. She did not, however, quite like to say so, and there was rather a

long pause before she spoke at all. Then she said only :

‘ And you really could not find her—for of course you tried to trace her ?’

‘ No, we never found her, though I think we did everything that was possible ; for Harold Leigh, who was an older and more experienced man than I was, came up at once and did all that he could to help me. I knew, unfortunately, so little about her that we had next to nothing to guide us, and she had made her plans too cleverly and coolly to be easily discovered.’

‘ Oh, not “ coolly ” !’ exclaimed Alice. ‘ It must have been in the feverish energy of her despair when everything she cared for was taken from her at once, and she found herself left to face lonely misery as best she could !’

Colonel Myddleton’s face flushed a little as she spoke, and he answered rather stiffly :



‘She was fully prepared for her father’s death—which nothing could either have prevented or delayed—and as to the rest, certainly the last thing I intended was either to drive her to despair or to leave her to lonely misery.’

‘You had meant all that was kind, I know—don’t misunderstand me,’ cried Alice eagerly and apologetically; ‘but kindness, even the most perfect, is not everything—and to *her, then*, must have been worse than nothing! When she found that you had married her reluctantly, for her good and consciously to your own disadvantage, what could she do but remove herself out of your way if it were possible?’

‘Don’t imagine that I underrate the gravity of my own mistake,’ replied Colonel Myddleton. ‘But though I admit that she was justified in resisting the boyish presumption which led me to assume that her

happiness could only be secured by my marrying her in order to take care of her, I don't think *she* should have felt it to be unpardonable ; and I am sure that the mistake being once made and irretrievable, the only right thing for both of us to do was to make the best of it and face life together as man and wife.'

' And if she had cared no more than you did that might have been possible,' said Alice ; ' but as it was——'

' All that did not alter the right and wrong of the matter,' hastily interposed Colonel Myddleton. ' And though I might not be madly in love with her, indifferent I certainly was not. The anxiety of those first weeks of suspense was horrible.'

Alice turned suddenly white.

' I see,' she said, low and hurriedly. ' You feared——'

' No, not that,' Colonel Myddleton re-

plied. 'I never thought it likely that she would destroy herself. It was almost worse to think of a beautiful girl of twenty throwing herself on the world without any protection whatever.'

'It seems so odd that you should not have traced her.'

'She had time, and circumstances favoured her. She had no acquaintances in London, and the landlady of their lodging, the only person who knew of our marriage, fully believed that I was unable to get away from Aldershot that week, and that all her arrangements were made with my knowledge and in preparation for joining me. Marion was clever and practical, and she wound up all her affairs quite quietly, without any help or any appearance of mystery that could excite suspicion. She paid every bill, openly gave away or sold many things that had belonged both to

her father and to herself, saying that they would be in her way in future, and finally left the house in a cab with her remaining luggage for Waterloo Station, just as she would have done had she been coming to me. We found the cabman without difficulty; but he could tell us nothing, for he had really taken her to the station and left her there. Beyond that we could discover no trace of her. It was the Saturday before Whit Sunday, and among the crowds travelling everywhere she had passed unnoticed; and as she had left by an evening train she had posted her letter to me in London late enough to ensure my not receiving it till Monday, which secured her a long start.'

'And you could not guess to whom she was likely to go?'

'I had not the slightest notion, for I knew, as I have told you, almost nothing

of her previous history. I had an advertisement repeatedly inserted in all the principal English and foreign newspapers, offering a reward for any information about her ; but nothing ever came of it. About six months after she went away, however, I had a short note from herself, saying merely that she thought it right, in answer to my advertisements, to let me know that she was safe and well, was living with kind friends, and earning with ease enough for all her wants. The letter was undated. The postmark was Paris ; but no inquiries there produced any result. Since that I have never heard of her either directly or indirectly ; but I do not feel that I have therefore any reason to doubt that she is living.'

'And did no one but the Leighs ever know of your marriage with her?' asked Alice hastily. 'Not even the Randolphs?'

‘No,’ he answered, rather reluctantly. ‘I could not bear the idea of all the comments and ridicule such a story was sure to excite if it got about, for I saw that it had an absurd as well as a tragic side, and I insisted on its being kept absolutely secret till we found Marion. I was wrong—I see that now—but at the time I cared only to protect myself from gossip and pity.’

‘They would have been too intolerable!’ cried Alice, with perfect comprehension and sympathy.

‘Harold’s judgment was against secrecy,’ continued Colonel Myddleton, ‘and he was undoubtedly right ; but he gave in to my determined wish for it, partly influenced, I think, by a little reluctance to have Bertha’s share in the matter known to his people.’

‘One can understand that,’ said Alice. ‘And during all these years have you really known nothing about her ?’

‘Nothing—and since that letter of hers I have scarcely even wished to know.’

Alice’s keen interest in the story had for the moment effaced her consciousness of how it affected herself, and she answered quickly, almost as if pleading Marion’s cause :

‘I suppose it must have been difficult for you to forgive her, or to see what excuse there was for her ; and yet, when one thinks of what she must have suffered—— If you could only have found her !’

Colonel Myddleton had hitherto spoken with resolute calmness, as if determined to adhere solely to a bare statement of facts, and to betray as little feeling of any kind as possible. Now, however, he answered with rather more excitement of tone and manner :

‘ You think that I judge her harshly ? I did not at first. I felt nothing, then, but

pity and an anxiety that was almost maddening. She was young and handsome, and though she was naturally good and pure-minded, and was not without some knowledge of the world, I could not feel that she was safe. I knew that she had been brought up without the fixed religious principles which usually rule a woman's life, and with many wild theories as to individual independence. I dreaded her throwing herself into bad hands (for I could feel no confidence as to what her friends might be), and before her good sense and right feeling had time to assert themselves, committing herself to some rash step which she would find it difficult to retract, however bitterly she might regret it. For weeks and months I thought of nothing but of how to find her, and save her from the consequences of her hasty folly. Try to imagine, then, what I felt when I received that note. The foolish

girl who fled in the first excitement of mortification was pardonable enough, but not the woman who, in cold blood, wrote and sent that insolent announcement of her prosperity, without apparently giving a thought to the anxiety she had caused, the feelings she had wounded, or the life she had spoiled. From that moment I hoped never to hear her name again.'

Alice had turned away as he spoke and covered her face with her hands. Her own temperament had made her understand and even sympathise with Marion up to this point. She fully believed that the poor girl, having given her whole passionate heart to the man whom she believed to be her lover, had been unable to bear the shock of finding that the gift was only half appreciated, and from a mixture of pride and self-sacrifice had determined to blot herself out of his life rather than be an

unwelcome burden, an obstacle in his way. Alice had pitied her intensely, and had felt that she was almost justified in refusing to take the conventional view of her duty, and in making a separate life for herself; but now, when Colonel Myddleton put *his* side of the case forcibly before her, she could not blind herself to the truth that Marion had been wrong, and must be held responsible for the consequences of a line of conduct deliberately chosen in defiance of generally accepted rules, and in obedience to the dictates merely of her own undisciplined impulses.

‘My only sin against her, as far as I can see,’ continued Colonel Myddleton, as Alice did not speak, ‘was an injudicious attempt to give her a safe home and make her as happy as I could. In return for that she condemned me never to have the chance of making one for myself. For years I cared

little about it. I knew that I could not marry, and there was an end of it. My fetters did not gall me, because I had no wish to use my liberty had it been given me. No temptation to desire it fell in my way, and when I came home from India this spring I was prepared to take my place in the family as the elderly bachelor uncle whose business it was to provide a younger nephew with an inheritance, and to make himself generally useful to all the young people about him. Unfortunately I was neither old enough nor wise enough for the part. For the last week I have once more thought of Marion incessantly, but neither with the pity of those early days nor with the half-resentful, half-contemptuous indifference of all the succeeding years. I cannot think of her with even common charity now—when I have no choice open to me but to leave my home and all my friends

because I dare not trust myself to stay there, since, thanks to her, I can never have the right even to try for the happiness which, could it have been won, would have made that home perfect. I don't defend myself either in the past or present. I was foolish and imprudent and much to blame then. I have been ten times more so now. But though I can never forgive myself, neither can I forgive her.'

There was rather a long silence after this. Alice understood him exactly as he meant her to understand. She fully realised that while wishing her to know beyond all possibility of doubt that he loved her, he had refrained with determined self-control from saying so in any way that could make her feel that he either expected or wished her to answer, or even to take any notice of his confession. She saw that—and more. She knew that he had resolutely kept back all

expression of the regret which affected him the most keenly, because he would not give the faintest sign of assuming that the folly and imprudence for which he condemned himself had injured her also.

She was right. An exciting scene—an open avowal of his love for her, and still more a virtual assumption that it was returned, while at the same time telling her that he had a wife who, as far as he knew, was living, though quite in accordance with some modern notions, would have been in his opinion inadmissible, a contemptible and selfish want of self-control. Alice understood this, and was grateful for the reticence which thus sought to spare her dignity and self-respect; but judging him by herself, she felt that his consideration would be best repaid by frankness on her part—if only she could find strength to be calm as well as frank.

The interest, apart from herself, which Alice had felt in the romance of Marion's story had passed away, and all her thoughts and feelings were now concentrated on the present, and on herself and Colonel Myddleton ; but though she had quite taken in all the facts of the case, and saw their inevitable consequence of absolute separation, she felt for the moment as if she had heard good tidings rather than bad.

All the worst part of her trouble was taken away by the certainty of his affection for herself, and the full justification of hers for him which the knowledge of the truth gave her. She fully believed that he had never thought of the danger of their friendly intimacy turning into a stronger feeling on either side until the conviction that it had done so on both had at last been forced upon him during the evening following the day at Atherley. Having the key to it,

she could now interpret rightly the peculiarity of his manner afterwards which at the time she had so completely misunderstood; and she no longer blamed him for any part of his conduct, while she saw nothing to be ashamed of in her own affection for the best man she had ever known. With this restoration of respect for him and for herself the sharpest sting was gone from her sorrow, while what remained would be borne in common with him and would therefore be comparatively easy to bear.

Alice had no time to think, she could only feel; but perhaps in such a case feeling was a safer guide than any other could have been. She raised her head at last and turned towards him. She was very pale and breathed more quickly than usual, but she spoke simply and quietly as she said:


‘Thank you for telling me this. Now

that I know the truth it will all be so much easier to bear. It is hard—very hard—on both of us; but it is not our own fault. We have nothing to blame ourselves or each other for.'

'You may say that—I cannot,' said Colonel Myddleton gravely. 'I ought to have foreseen and prevented——'

'It would have been of no use,' she interrupted him, with an attempt to speak lightly. 'Do you remember my telling you that evening after you had taken me to Corbie's Pool, that if I ever came to grief in any way connected with our expedition I would accept it as proof of that pedlar's being a true Radclyffe? I had not to wait for *this* to convince me. The parcel of papers and relics which Uncle Laurence sent me contained full proof of it.'

She told him in a few words what she had discovered, ending with:



‘Fate will have its way, you see. I am a “daughter of Sir Brian’s line.” I have seen the Cross, and have scoffed at it in vain. The spell means to make itself respected, and so far it certainly has the best of it, we must admit.’

Colonel Myddleton had been obviously startled by her story, and when she ceased speaking he moved hastily nearer to her and said abruptly :

‘I cannot pretend not to understand you, but——’

Alice interrupted him.

‘We will pretend nothing. What good could it do either of us to make believe that I don’t care, when we both know that I do? I cannot tell you how thankful I am that I met you here this afternoon—for if I had come to my senses to-morrow morning it might have been too late. I was ready to do anything that I could hope

would prove to you and to the world that what you did and where you went was nothing to me. Barbe d'Yffiniac, who had guessed a good deal, I think, though I had told her nothing, had almost persuaded me——'

And there she stopped.

'For heaven's sake don't let that woman's wretched sophistries guide you now,' exclaimed Colonel Myddleton energetically; for, knowing of whom their party consisted, he could easily imagine what Madame d'Yffiniac's advice had been. 'If you had told her nothing, what right had she to force her advice on you? That kind of woman thinks herself privileged to meddle in everything!'

Alice's colour deepened painfully, but she looked up bravely, and answered without hesitation:

'You are unjust to her, for it was all my

own fault. I agreed to bring them here, and I told them everything I knew about the place, Alix Radclyffe's story, and Cicely's too, in order that she might make use of it all for her writing. I did it because for the last three days I have been miserable and wicked—almost mad, I think—and I hoped it would vex you that she should do it through my help and apparently, though not really, at my instigation. I am in my right mind again now, but I cannot undo what I have done as to that—I can only be sorry and ashamed.'

'She may make her most successful novel out of it for anything I care, as long as she does you no harm.'

'That will be impossible now that I know the truth, which she, of course, can never know. You need not be afraid. Even when I was the most unreasonable,

and therefore was anxious to believe Barbe if I could, I had a feeling that Cicely Radclyffe's view of her own case was the sounder of the two. Now I am sure of it.'

Colonel Myddleton knew Alice well enough to see that she was in danger at present of going into the other extreme, and whatever punishment he might have deserved for previous imprudence now came to him severely enough in the knowledge that he must leave her to struggle alone through all her troubles, half of which he had himself brought upon her.

There was a pause, broken by his saying, with more agitation than he had yet shown :

'Alice, if you would not condemn me to perpetual self-reproach, do not let that stupid legend take hold of your imagination. Don't make your life gloomy by

fancying yourself doomed to lifelong sorrow in some form or other.'

Alice turned quickly towards him.

'Don't look like that! I cannot bear it,' she exclaimed impulsively. 'Why should you speak as if you had injured me? I am too bewildered now to know exactly *how* I shall bear it—but I *will* bear it. You need not be afraid for me.'

'And one thing more you must promise me,' he said, as, taking both her hands in his, he stood looking down at her with a grave, anxious tenderness which severely tried her self-control. 'It must be long before we meet again, but I shall have news of you now and then from the Randolphs, and shall hope to hear that things go well with you. The sooner you can forget all this the better for you; and promise not to let a thought of sparing me pain ever induce you to re-

fuse any happiness that you would otherwise take.'

Alice raised her eyes to his. They were full of tears, but she kept her voice steady.

'I don't think I agree with you as to its being best to forget,' she said gently. 'But I may safely promise you that I will refuse no happiness which I can honestly and with a clear conscience take. But *you*—what are you going to do?' she added, with a sudden recollection that for him the future was even more certainly a blank than for herself. She was sure that she never *should* forget, never *could* change; but he might hope it for her as a possible chance of happiness, while she could see nothing before him but hopeless, dreary loneliness.

'I am going abroad for the present,' he replied. 'It will be better for us both, and

there is nothing to prevent it. Afterwards, for the boys' sake, I must come back and live here. By that time I hope we shall be able to meet as friends, though there must even then be a difference from what has been this summer; but you will know the true reason of the change and will not misunderstand.'

'No. Never again,' was her almost whispered answer.

There was nothing more to be said. To linger could only be to torture her and to try his own strength needlessly; yet it was difficult to go, and it was perhaps fortunate that the sound of voices on the zig-zag path leading from the glen up the cliff roused them both to the necessity of parting without delay.

'They are coming to look for me!' exclaimed Alice, starting to her feet in dismay.

'Yes. I must go,' he said hastily, and with a few more words of earnest farewell, which made her feel as if her heart must break, he dropped her hands and left her, vanishing with Nero round one corner of the crag only two minutes before Madame d'Yffiniac and Mr. St. Aubyn appeared on the little platform from the path on the opposite side.

END OF VOL. II.

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